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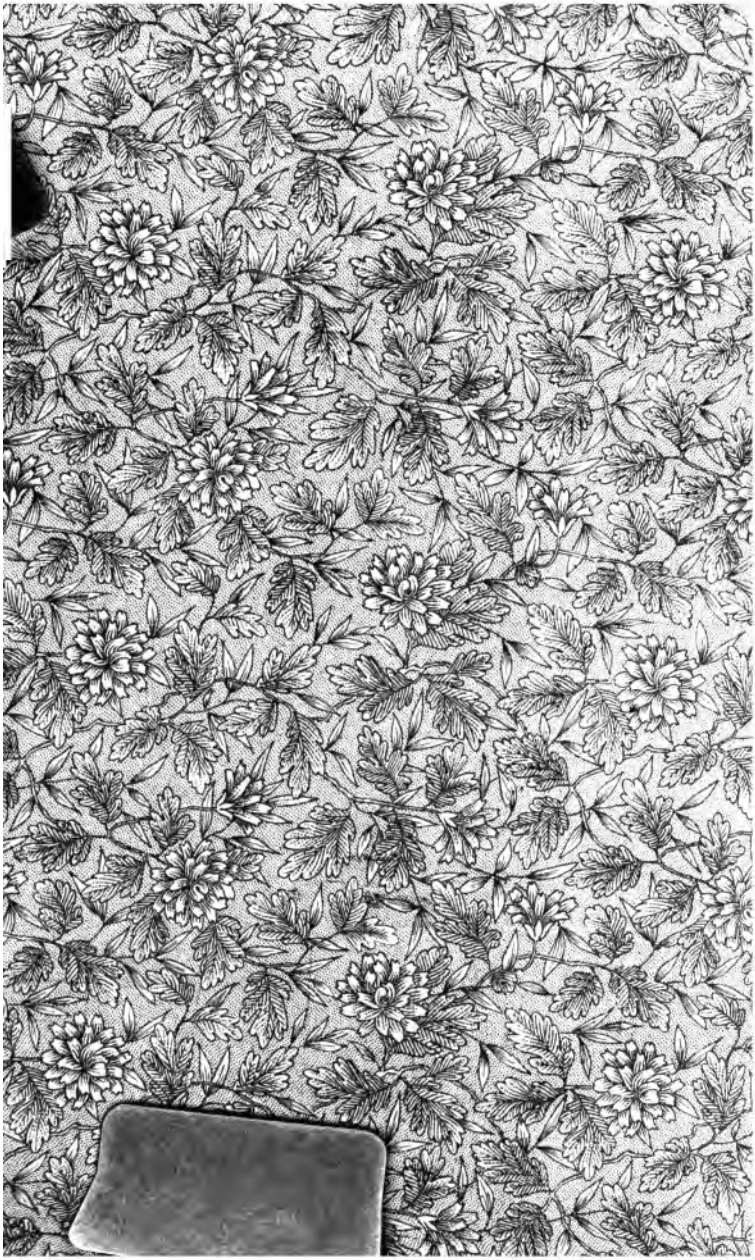
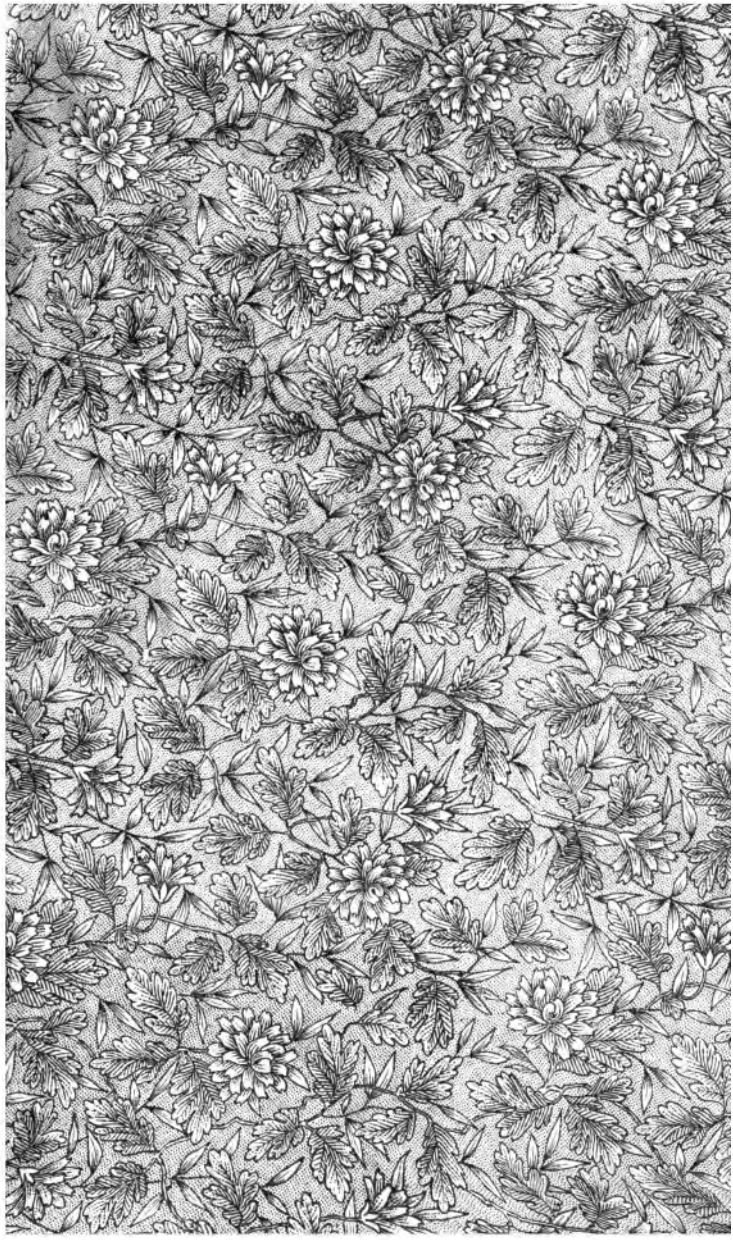
MARY ST. JOHN

MISS R. N. CAREY





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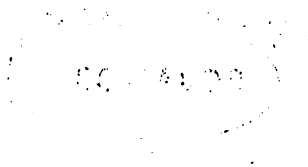


MARY ST. JOHN

A Novel

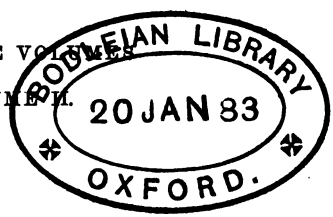
BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'WOOED AND MARRIED,' 'QUEENIE'S WHIM,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME II.



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MARY ST. JOHN.

CHAPTER I.

MALLY.

As Grey walked back in the twilight, he told himself that he had done a right thing in holding out a kindly hand of ministration to that poor sinner. The picture of the miserable man sitting on the bench in the sunset with Dollie's bright face beside him, the remembrance of the broken wretch in his dreary garret, with the shrewish face of Mally peering out from her black handkerchief, rose before him, and the disgust he had first felt at the encounter faded into a mixed feeling of horror and pity.

Good heavens! that such lives should be lived out! such pitiful parts played in the

broad light of day! and then Grey softly whispered to himself the old pathetic words, "The only son of his mother, and she was a widow." Ah, how terrible it all was! and the young man walked on in a softened and subdued frame of mind.

He had never come across misery like this, and it affected him strangely. In his quiet way he had made himself useful in his generation; he had taken great interest in a working man's club, that his vicar had lately formed; and during the previous winter he had devoted two of his evenings to teaching algebra and the rudiments of Latin to an advanced class. In this way he had secured an entrance into half a dozen homes belonging to the more respectable artisans; and it had latterly grown a pleasure to him to seek out these humble friends, and by intelligent conversation and the loan of his scanty library, to cement a good understanding and sympathy that should be of mutual benefit.

Many of Grey's friends called him visionary, or an enthusiast, for leaving the beaten tracks of a so-called young man's life; but he had

small respect for these busy mockers. "Some fellows pass their lives in laughing at everything," he said once to Dollie, to whom he had shyly spoken of his work; "they are always thinking of what will please number one; they make a sort of fetich of it, and everything that comes under the head of duty is offered up to it. The selfishness of some fellows is amazing."

"I think it is very good of you to give up so much time to your poorer neighbours," replied Dollie gravely, feeling that some word of commendation was necessary. What a good young man he was, to be sure! Dollie was not quite certain whether she liked good young men.

But to her surprise Mr. Lyndhurst grew suddenly very red.

"There is no goodness in it," he said rather abruptly. "I am fond of work; I like teaching almost as much as Bertie abhors it; and then these fellows are so intelligent, and so much in earnest!

"Why," continued Grey, warming up into enthusiasm in spite of himself, as he touched

upon his favourite hobby; "it is quite a pleasure to me to go and see some of these men in their homes. There is Joe Puckell, for example, the head of my class, and a first-rate mathematician; when I sit there talking politics to Joe, with his pretty little wife sewing beside us—she is a dressmaker I believe—I find it as hard to get away as many fellows do to leave a ball. I never knew a more interesting talker in any sphere of life than Joe Puckell. And then there is Sam Green;" but here Grey pulled himself up adroitly, for Dollie was politely stifling a yawn. She did not at all want to hear about Sam Green; she was rather ashamed of her want of interest afterwards, when, on that very evening, she heard Mary questioning Grey quite eagerly about this same Joe Puckell; she thought he looked rather reproachfully across the room as he answered.

Grey quickened his footsteps as much as possible; it was growing late, and he wanted to see Charlotte before dinner. What was his surprise, then, as he walked up the courtyard, to find the door of the château open, and Dollie

standing on the threshold in her white dress, looking out anxiously into the moonlight.

"Oh, there you are!" she said in a tone of relief, as he hurried up to her, scarcely daring to believe his eyes. "What a dreadful time you have been; I was getting quite frightened, thinking something had happened to poor Walter. Now you must tell me all about it, everything from beginning to end," commanded Dollie with sweet peremptoriness.

"Not now; there is no time for so long a story. Come to the morning-room after dinner, and I will tell you and Charlotte together; there is so much to arrange; we three will talk it over together." But Dollie persisted; she had been waiting ever so long; she did not want her dinner—dinners were such slow stupid things. She wanted to hear about Walter; he must tell her at once. But she might as well have spoken to the wind—Grey was simply inflexible.

"Not now, by-and-by," he said laughingly. He felt as gay and light-hearted as a boy as he ran upstairs. The barrier was broken down

between them; that she should be waiting for him, and she should be speaking to him with her old animation and eagerness—surely poor Walter had done him good service; and he whistled softly to himself as he hurried through his toilette, that he might be the sooner in her presence again.

But Grey's triumph was brief; his inflexibility had affronted Dollie, and she resolved to punish him. She had waited for him all this time, had been anxious on his behalf, and he had refused to gratify her. "He may be good, but I can't bear stiff proper young men," thought Dollie, marching in her stateliest manner to the dining-room. Grey found her there alone when he hurried down; she was waltzing in the firelight with Mark Antony. He had a fleeting view of the dog's stiff reluctant movements, and a white dress floating softly towards him; and then Mark Antony's four paws were on the carpet again, and Dollie was standing motionless looking into the fire, a little flushed and panting, but with the corners of her mouth drawn downwards.

"Where is Charlotte?" asked Grey, looking

round, and then drawing near the fire; but Dollie immediately withdrew.

"I do not know."

"And Bertie?"

Dollie gave a little shrug in imitation of Charlotte, and stooped down to pat Mark Antony; but the waltz had ruffled his feelings, and he took refuge behind Grey.

"Is Mary still invisible?"

"I believe so."

"What is the last report from the sick-room?"

"I do not know; shall I ring for Justine and ask?" This was unpromising, and Grey was silent; but after a few moments he began again, but this time not in the form of interrogation; he quite understood he was being punished, and a little latent fun appeared in his eyes.

"It is such a lovely night," with emphasis.

"So I see," with marked indifference.

"I quite enjoyed my walk home. I did it in twenty minutes, I am sure. Let me see—it was five minutes to six when I passed the church of the Redemptorist, just after I parted with poor Walter."

"Please do not fatigue yourself," interrupted Dollie, looking very severe and uncommonly pretty. "Charlotte is not here, and it would be a pity to repeat yourself. Ah, here comes your brother;" and then and there naughty Dollie woke up from her languor and nonchalance, and began to rouse herself. She had so much to say to him that she could not see Grey offering his arm to take her into dinner, and he was obliged to content himself with Charlotte. During the whole of that meal she bore herself in an unusually flighty manner, eating little, and keeping up a by-play of jokes with Bertie. When Grey spoke to her, she answered in monosyllables, and with an air of being interrupted; but Grey took his punishment very cheerfully, and after a time confined his conversation to Charlotte.

He had no idea that the girl was actually annoyed; the fact was, Dollie was disturbed in her mind. In her anxiety about Walter she had forgotten all about that unfortunate talk on the bridge by the Béguinage; for the moment it had escaped her memory. She had been pleased with Grey—grateful to him for

obeying her wishes; and she had waited for his return with real impatience and longing.

His laughing repulse had angered her; she had been forward—she ought not to have been there waiting for him in the hall. No wonder he treated her like a child when she acted like one. She remembered that she had pressed close up to him in her eagerness, looking up in his face, and a peculiar expression had come into his—a certain look that always made her hot and shy. Perhaps he misconstrued her motives and thought; but here Dollie frowned angrily, and shook herself free of such dreadful ideas. One thing was certain—if she were dying of curiosity she would not go into the morning-room after dinner. She would hear it all from Charlotte afterwards. But she little knew Grey's pertinacity; as she went into the drawing-room he suddenly started up, and followed her.

"We are waiting for you, Miss Maynard, please; Charlotte is free for the next half hour."

"I am not coming," returned Dollie, quietly taking up her book. She spoke quite gently

and primly, for she was half afraid of him by this time. "I want to finish this volume; I shall hear it all from Charlotte to-morrow."

She opened her book as she spoke, and seemed intent on finding her place; but looking up after a moment, she found that Grey, instead of taking his dismissal, was standing looking at her with kindly amused eyes.

"Now, Miss Maynard, I call this too bad."

"So do I, to keep poor Charlotte waiting."

"Charlotte will have to wait a little longer if you are going to give me trouble. No, I do not intend to go unless you come with me. Aren't you a little hard on me after walking all those miles to do you a service? You asked me to go and I went," finished Grey very solemnly.

"Thank you; you were very good, but I am sure Charlotte will not like waiting."

"Neither do I like it," returned Grey in a droll, good-humoured voice. "Come, Miss Maynard, you are a little put out with me, I see, because I did not answer your questions; but you will forgive me, I know, and not

refuse to help me in this very real work, where souls and bodies too are at stake. Come." And his voice was so patient and pleading, and his eyes were so kind, that Dollie suddenly felt ashamed of her ill-humour and suspicion, and gave him her hand, and let him lead her unresistingly to Charlotte.

It was well that she did not see his smile and the brightness of his face as they crossed the dark passage, for she would certainly have made some excuse and gone back. His look was demure enough when he began his story, to which Dollie—now quite oblivious of her book—listened with breathless attention, while Charlotte was scarcely less interested.

What was to be done? He must be rescued and comforted—that was the conclusion to which the two women came at once. Grey must go again to-morrow; he must find decent lodgings, and some one who could cook and attend to his comforts. If he were dying—did Mr. Lyndhurst really think he was dying—his last days must be made as comfortable as possible.

"Take care of his poor body, and perhaps

he will have time and opportunity to repent," said Dollie with great solemnity, and Charlotte dried her eyes, and added—

"Yes, dear Grey; and you must talk to him, and tell him how very wicked he has been, and how he has broken ma pauvre Tante's heart, and what a wretched, unhappy life he has caused her to lead. But there, Mary is waiting for me, and I must go. Good-night, ma chère," to Dollie, and waving her hand to both, Charlotte bustled away.

When they were left alone, Grey moved a little nearer to Dollie, as though he would bid her good-night too.

"Are you going?" she asked rather hurriedly.

"Well, yes; I must shut myself up for the rest of the evening, as I have half a dozen letters to write—one for the next Indian mail," and then he hesitated, and his tone became almost humble. "I wish you would promise me one thing before I go."

"What is that?" but Dollie's eyes sank, and her colour rose under his fixed look.

"Promise me never to be offended again

about such a little thing; it was such a little thing, you know."

She coloured still more at that, but answered "Yes" readily enough. She would have liked to have told him that she was angered more at herself than him; that she had been forward, thoughtless, altogether childish,—but there was no telling him that. His manner—gentle as it was—recalled too forcibly that evening by the Béguinage, and she began to feel in real earnest that the man before her was not one with whom she could trifle.

"Now you know your power over me, I am sure you will be merciful," he went on; "even very little things can hurt when one feels as I do. Be natural—be your own self with me; we are to be good friends, you know;" and then he smiled at her and went away.

Dollie never knew why the tears rushed to her eyes when she was left alone, but somehow the simple dignity of the young man—his gentleness and unselfishness—touched and subdued her. How good he was! how altogether friendly and pleasant except for that one

terrible mistake! Oh, if he were only as nice and good-looking as Mr. Bertie! but how could such darkness and angularity find favour in any girl's eyes?

"It is just like a story-book—the wrong one always comes in novels," thought Dollie to herself in a vexed way. "There are mistakes, complications, all sorts of dismal horrors; but how unpleasant it is in real life. I never knew it could be so horrid to have a lover,—at least a lover that was not wanted. If it had been," but there she sighed, and the current of her thought changed. She began to think more kindly of Grey; he had asked her to be natural,—to be her own self with him,—not to tease him with childish humours. Well, it was a little thing to ask after what had passed between them. She had been obliged to hurt him terribly in one thing, but at least she could be good friends with him; she would be natural, as he said, and do kind little things for him. He could not misunderstand her,—he was too wise and keen-eyed for that; but at least she must make herself agreeable to all her aunt's guests as long as she

remained at the château. But oh! if she could only go home to her mother!—and at this point of her meditation Dollie again indulged in a hearty fit of crying.

Never had an offer caused more floods of tears.

She woke the next morning in a calmer frame of mind, but on going downstairs she found Mr. Lyndhurst alone in the salle-à-manger, reading by the window. To her surprise he beckoned to her somewhat mysteriously.

"I have something to show you," he said. "Read that;" and he put a crumpled piece of paper into her hands. "It was brought to me just now;" and Dollie, with some difficulty, managed to decipher the scrawl.

"Come to me at once," it said. "I have had a terrible night. Mally is dead!"

"Dead! and you saw her yesterday! How very dreadful! What does it all mean? Shall you go?" asked Dollie, looking rather pale.

"Yes; I will just have my breakfast first. Will you pour me out my coffee?" And as she hastily obeyed, "Now I want you to do one more thing for me. Will you go up to Char-

lotte and ask her for the address of that woman who lives in the Rue de St. Jean?—I forget the number—the one who has two rooms to let. Charlotte thought her a likely person to take care of poor Reid."

Dollie's bird-like movements soon fulfilled his behest. "I saw Charlotte and Mary too," she panted. "Mrs. Reid seems worse this morning; they had a dreadful night with her; they were both up; Charlotte is such a piteous object, with black rings round her eyes; and poor Mary looks sadly tired."

"It is too much for Mary. I must speak to Dr. Arnaud if this goes on much longer," he said, pushing away his plate and rising hastily. "What a sad state of things it is! I shall find you here, I suppose, if I want any advice or help about things?"

"Oh yes, I shall be here," returned Dollie very demurely; but in her heart she was pleased. It was nice of him to treat her in this friendly way, and make use of her; evidently he had a good opinion of her sense and capability, and then Dollie settled down as comfortably as she could to her solitary morning; for Bertie, as

usual, was working off his restlessness by an interminable walk.

Meanwhile Grey was not long in finding his way to the tall narrow house in the Rue de St. Antoine. The door was open, and he climbed up the steep stairs without pausing to ask questions.

A muffled "Come in" answered his knock. Grey thought the room looked a little less deplorable than it had done yesterday; a small fire burned in the stove. The bottle and glasses had been cleared away, and a coffeepot replaced them; but in the seat that Mally occupied yesterday Walter was sitting, or rather crouching, with his face hidden in his hands. When he looked up to greet his visitor, Grey almost recoiled, his countenance was so altered and ghastly; evidently the man had had an awful shock.

"Well," said Grey kindly, taking the cold, shaking hand, "I did not expect to receive such news this morning. How did it happen?"

Walter stared at him stupidly. "I don't know."

"You don't know!"

He shook his head.

"Come, this won't do, Reid. I don't think you understand my question; you have been having some wrong sort of comfort this morning; is not what you wrote to me true, that your wife is dead?"

"Yes, she is in there," pointing with his trembling hand to the door of the inner room. "Yes, it is true; you shall see her presently. Poor Mally! she was the curse of my life; but I never thought she would end like this."

"But how did it happen?" demanded Grey again rather sternly, for he saw clearly that the man's faculties were clouded; evidently he had had recourse to stimulants to deaden thought.

"That is just what I cannot tell you," he persisted. "I had gone in there to lie down; my cough was terrible, and I thought it no use trying to sleep. But about one or two o'clock I must have fallen into a doze——"

"Well?"

"I had left her in here," dropping his voice almost to a whisper; "she was pleased with the fire you ordered for us, and she would not quit it. I think she must have had some money

by her, for I know she got some wine somehow."

"I feared that," was Grey's sole rejoinder.

"I must have been asleep, for I woke up with her calling me, 'Walter, Walter.' It was her way; I don't know that she wanted anything; most likely the fire had gone out and she found herself in darkness; but I did not answer, and pretended to be asleep. I have often done it before to keep her tongue quiet. I thought she would be coming in presently in search of me; but she only called once, 'Walter, Walter;' I can hear it now."

"And what then?" asked Grey, for he seemed to pause in uncontrollable horror.

"And then I heard her move, but not towards this door. She had missed her way," whispered Walter, in a voice that made his listener's blood curdle. "You know how close the stairs are to our room, and how steep they are. I could hear her strike them again and again—such heavy thuds! I knew what had happened, but I lay and could not move. When they brought her up they thought I was asleep, but I think I must have fainted."

"Did they understand—the people of the house, I mean?" asked Grey, feeling a grave question might be involved.

"Yes," he groaned; "they knew what she had had, and her ways. No one thought of blaming me. Do you think I was to blame," he asked piteously, "because I did not answer? She was always calling me out of my sleep like that, for nothing but to make me swear at her; she was always provoking a scene."

"I think you ought to have watched her more closely; you should have taken the poison from her."

"Impossible," was the answer; "you don't know Mally. Why, she was as strong as any man; and look at me, a poor broken-down creature. Come and look at her," he continued, rising feebly from his chair. "She did not suffer much, they say; she was quite dead when they took her up;" and Grey reluctantly followed him into the other room.

Poor misguided Mally! There she lay with the black handkerchief still binding her grey hair. After the first moment of repulsion,

Grey was surprised to find how youthful and handsome the features looked, now the wrinkles were smoothed out; in her prime she must have been a fine-looking creature. Walter spoke out his thought. "Ay, she was a bonnie creature once, when I first knew her. Poor Mally! but it was all little Belle that led her wrong, that and her pride in acting. She was a bad wife to me, a blight over my whole life; but I never wished her such an end as this;" and he spoke with real feeling.

"Now, I have told you all, and you won't go away," he said, when they were back in the other room. "I can't be left alone with that," he continued imploringly.

"I cannot leave you here to-night, certainly," replied Grey. "I am going now to try and find you some clean respectable lodgings. I have a great deal to do. I must see the people of the house, and the doctor; and there is plenty to settle."

"I wish I could come with you," said Walter wistfully; "but I am so weak, I can hardly cross the room. Do not be longer than you can help; come back before it grows

dark. I am no coward; but a man needs to be strong indeed before he is left alone with that!"

"I will come back before dark if you promise me one thing. Take nothing but what I send you — a little soup and some coffee. Take plenty of that, but nothing else, mind."

"I promise," returned Walter, with abject submission. "I only took some eau-de-vie, because of the faintness and terror. Ah! I see you do not trust me, but I will keep my word for all that. I am not such a fool as to offend a good fellow like you;" and he gave a miserable laugh as he went back to his chair; but before he left Grey saw that he had relapsed into his old crouching attitude, and was hiding his face in his hands.

What was to be done? Grey was at his wits' end; he must be away the greater part of the day, for lodgings might be hard to find, and there was much to settle; he must get money, too, from Charlotte.

If only Bertie had not started off for that insane twenty miles' walk! and then there

was Mary shut up in the sickroom, and utterly exhausted—Charlotte too; but Charlotte would be no manner of use. Dollie — would he ask Dollie? would it be fit for her, a mere child, to remain hours alone with a corpse, and a miserable object like Walter? There were people in the house, he remembered—women and children—that she could summon to her aid; and he would look in on her whenever he could. If she were frightened, she could easily refuse; but he was in a sore strait, and he thought he must ask her. One thing was certain, he dare not leave Walter alone; he might go out of his mind with terror; he might destroy himself; he—well, it was no use conjuring up horrors—Dollie was a woman after all, and a very courageous one; he must go home first and talk to her.

CHAPTER II.

"TOO LATE! THERE IS NO SUCH WORD."

WHEN Grey opened the door of the morning-room, he found it empty,—the bird had flown; the salon and salle-à-manger were alike deserted; but as he paused in the hall in some perplexity, he thought he heard the sound of Dollie's voice behind the red baize door that shut in the kitchen and store-rooms.

As he pushed it open, he could hear her plainly; she was scolding some one volubly.

"Fi donc! n'avez vous pas honte?" said the shrill young voice; "vous êtes d'une humeur affreuse, Katchen; ces pauvres oiseaux — il vaut mieux avoir trop que trop peu; je le veux absolutement — absolutement — do you hear me? or I will help myself, you horrid old woman, there!"

"Hein!" mumbled Katchen; "not one

grain more, I protest. Is it Katchen who will rob the mistress on her dying bed? No, not for all the meess Anglaise that ever were born. Chut! are not their crops full already? What you dare, meess—out of my very hand! Where is mademoiselle? will she see her old Katchen insulted in her own cuisine? I will resign; I will have justice. I will it say; never more shall that jeune meess enter here to break my heart."

A burst of girlish laughter interrupted Katchen. "Have you a heart, my little old Katchen? It must be the size of a pin if you could see all these beautiful pets starving, and not allow me a grain. Another handful; yes, I will have it. There, miser, avaricious wretch that you are!"

"Meess!" screamed Katchen; but here Grey in much amusement put an end to the duet. As he opened the door a great ray of sunlight met him; the red-brick floor, the gleaming brasses, the bright tins, were all touched by it. Katchen's withered old cheeks were flaming, as she hobbled across the kitchen with a long iron spoon in her hand. She looked to him,

with her knotted grey hair and small angry blue eyes, like some malevolent fairy — so wrathful and so diminutive. She shot angry gleams at him as she retreated to stir her pot-au-feu. "These barbarous Insulaires!" he heard her mutter between her closed teeth. Evidently Katchen was in one of her worst humours; woe betide Charlotte if she crossed her path now!

Grey smiled to himself as he stepped up to the low window, and then he was silent. He was not prepared for the pretty picture before him.

The window looked out on a sunny court-yard, with some stone steps bordered with yellow lichen. There was the red-peaked roof of the stable, and a gilt vane over it; a well with a covered top stood in the centre; and the air was full of the fanning of wings, and the sound of soft gobblings, and peckings, and swellings of inflated throats; for there, surrounded by a hundred pigeons—at her feet, on her arms, her shoulders, even her head—stood Dollie, bareheaded, in her little blue gown, and with her fair hair shining like gold in the

sunshine, laughing for very glee out of mischief and the fulness of life.

The stones were strewn with Indian corn and great yellow peas; and amongst them strutted pigeons with brown ruffs and white fantails; and carriers with green and purple necks, black and grey pigeons; and others in various-coloured plumage strutting with little feet and small sleek heads—now with contented coos and now with vixenish pecks, like fine ladies at a feast; plenty of plumage, and a shrew here and there. And Dollie laughed and watched them, amused at their greediness, and threw up her strong young arms, tossing a trumpeter into the air — where he turned a somersault, and then betook himself to the stable roof, and sat in a row with a pouter and two brown ruffs, looking down on the others like wallflowers or chaperones at a ball, swelling with discontent and ruffling themselves.

And then she caught up a small carrier, and kissed and cuddled it, and held it between her warm hands, caring nothing for its frightened pecks; and then there was a footstep and a

sudden whir of a hundred wings, and looking up at the sound, she saw Mr. Lyndhurst standing on the horse-block, watching her. Her first thought was vexation at being discovered in such a childish amusement, but the momentary cloud dissolved before the gravity of his look.

"I wanted to speak to you; I was obliged to follow you here," he said apologetically. "If you will come in, I will explain my errand." And Dollie actually obeyed him without a word; she only laughed once as Katchen shook her fist at them as they passed.

"Never mind, my good Katchen, you will be in a better humour to-morrow," she said amiably; and then she smoothed down her dress and composed her face to listen.

No, he had not done wrong to seek her, he felt, when he had told his sad tale. How she flushed over it with sudden sympathy and interest! "Wait for me; I will not be an instant," was all she said; and almost before he had finished listening to her retreating footsteps she was beside him again, panting a little, and fastening her long gloves with

fingers that trembled with eagerness, but otherwise quite ready and composed.

"You will not be afraid if I am not back for some time?" he said rather anxiously, as they walked rapidly down the avenue; "and you will promise me one thing—not to go into the inner room,—indeed you must promise me that;" and his voice took the slight touch of peremptoriness that Dollie had unconsciously begun to obey.

"I think I can promise you that," she replied very gently; "I have never seen anyone dead, and I do not think that I should dare cross the threshold. Mary is different to me—she is older and more experienced; she has attended a great many deathbeds already —old men and women and little children; is it not strange? And she is only a girl!"

"Ah! Mary is an exception; I have never met any one like her. She has been helpful and self-reliant from a child; and then her training has been in a severe school—she is a deaconess in all but the name."

"Yes, she is very good," responded Dollie, with a sigh; and then they were both silent until they reached their destination.

If Grey had doubted the wisdom of his plan, in a few minutes he doubted it no longer. That day Dollie was to appear in a new character.

Directly she caught sight of the miserable garret with its skylight, and the bowed crouching figure near the stove, a change seemed to pass over her, and womanly brightness and pity began to shine in her eyes.

"I am come to sit with you, Walter," she said quite pleasantly and indifferently, as though the poor broken-down wretch before her had been a well-known and favourite cousin; she took no notice of the somewhat vacant and stupid stare with which he received her. Uninvited, she laid aside her jacket and hat, and then, to Grey's surprise, she took out a baby's sock from a fairy reticule, and commenced knitting.

"Don't let us keep you; you have to be busy, you know," she said, dismissing Mr. Lyndhurst with a brisk business-like nod. "I shall talk to Walter and amuse him until you come back." And Grey had no excuse to linger; but if Dollie could have heard that

muttered blessing that swelled her lover's heart as he left the room! And once more the vow was registered that he would win her yet for his wife.

It was a strange experience for Dollie, but she bore her part bravely; her presence seemed to soothe the wretched man, and after a little while he dropped asleep. He dozed fitfully, and always woke in terror; then she would speak to him brightly, and mend the fire, or even hum a light air, though certainly her voice was not as clear as usual.

At noon a tempting little meal from a neighbouring restaurant made its appearance, for Grey had not forgotten Dollie's young and healthy appetite; but she had much trouble in inducing Walter to take even a few mouthfuls of food. A sick horror seemed to be upon him; his hands shook so that she had to lift the soup to his lips. As she put it down he looked up at her with almost a senile expression of imbecility.

"Did you hear? There it is again, 'Walter, Walter.' She is wanting me in there;" and he actually tried to stagger to his feet,

and then failed for weakness, and clutched her arm as she stood by him.

Dollie's lips turned a little white, but she determined not to be silly.

"Hush! you have been asleep and dreaming, Walter; no one is calling. Shall I sing to you a little? and she broke into a simple childish hymn, and then stopped, half terrified, as the sound of a hoarse sob broke on her ear.

"My poor Walter, what is it now?" in a voice of the sweetest pity, for the shaking hands were covering the man's face again.

It was long before she drew it from him. Those words, that air,—he had heard them last at his mother's knee; back through the guilty past there had come to him the memory of an innocent childhood.

"I was a little fellow,—just Belle's age,—and she used to sing it to me on Sunday evenings," he groaned. "I remember her velvet dress, and the diamonds on her fingers, and how she used to stroke and kiss my curls. I had curls, I remember; ah! and so had Belle—poor Mally used to be so proud of them,—but Belle is dead, and Mally lies yonder, and she—" (for

the divine word mother would not form itself on his lips)—"and she is dying, while I——" but the rest of his speech may not be repeated; it fell on Dollie's shrinking ear like the cry of a lost soul in torment; now indeed the twin scorpions of remorse and anguish were preying upon their victim. Would Dollie quail and leave him at those fearful words? Would she, his earthly good angel, desert him in his hour of retribution and woe? No! for as he groaned and hid his face, the small white fingers rested on his shabby coat-sleeve, a sweet girlish voice repeated, trembling, those words so applicable to all sinners: "I will arise and go to my Father."

What was she telling him in a voice so broken with tears? what old-world story of a lost son in a far-off country—of a miserable hireling feeding on husks—of a starved and stricken wretch returning to the home he had left?

A long way off, yet met, discerned, and welcomed! Ah! yes, he had heard it before—the robe, the shoes, and the ring,—he knew it now; they called it the Prodigal Son. Ay,

but not such a prodigal as he. Ah! but what was she telling him—"This story is for you, Walter; you must arise too. But there is the mother first, earthly forgiveness to seek before the heavenly, even at the eleventh hour there is paradise to be gained."

More and much more did she tell him, in stammering, broken sentences, some half intelligible—for she wept so—some penetrating like keen iron into the bruised and guilty heart. "Too late, too late!" that was all the answer he gave.

"Too late! Hush! in all God's world—His living world—there is no such word. Do you hear me, Walter?—no such word. Do you know what I mean to do?" and as he looked up at her, stirred by a certain fervour in her voice, she went on still more eagerly—"I mean to watch my opportunity; I shall tell no one, not even Mary; but when I see that she can understand me, I shall tell her—you know whom I mean—that you are sorry, and she shall send you a message of forgiveness before she dies."

He shook his head.

"She will never do that. I have sinned too deeply."

"Yes, too deeply for any but God's and a mother's forgiveness. Now I will sing you that hymn again, and then we will talk no more about this."

And so it was that Grey, returning heated and weary in the dusk, heard the sweet sounds floating down the staircase, and found Dollie singing with the tears still wet on her cheek, and Walter listening with averted face.

They both started at his entrance, and Grey felt rather than heard the sigh of relief with which the poor little watcher greeted him.

"Have I been too long?" he said, looking at her keenly; "but there was so much to do. Now I have a fiacre at the door, and everything is ready. Come, Reid, we are going to leave this dismal hole. I have found you more comfortable lodgings."

"Must I go in there first?" the bewildered look returning.

"No, certainly not; you must get to bed; and I have sent for Dr. Arnaud. Come, rouse yourself and make the effort;" but though Grey

spoke sharply, he was secretly dismayed at the ravages the last few hours had made in his appearance—it was a dying man he was supporting; he knew that now.

What a relief it was to Dollie to be leaving that gloomy street behind! she had done her part bravely, but the strain had been terrible. She leant back looking almost as exhausted as Walter, as they drove on slowly. By-and-by they stopped before a neat-looking house with green jalousies looking out on the canal.

A brisk-looking woman in widow's dress received them, and ushered them into a small comfortable apartment. A pleasant warmth diffused from the closed stove; a coffee-service stood on the little round table; through the open door Dollie caught sight of a trim little bedroom, with a brass bedstead with snowy coverlid, and a black polished armoire, and a strip of gay-coloured carpet. Poor Walter! no wonder he looked round him as though he were in the vestibule of paradise.

"Do you mind waiting here a little?" asked Grey. "Dr. Arnaud will be here directly, and after that I shall be able to leave him in

Madame Probin's charge; and we can go home together;" and Dollie nodded assent.

The little doctor eyed her rather shrewdly as he entered. "These English demoiselles, what will they not do? They care for good deeds more than for les convenances," he said to himself, with an expressive shrug, half of admiration and half of dismay, as he went in to his patient.

"He thinks that he cannot last more than a week or two. That last chill has done for him," said Grey, as he and Dollie returned to the château in the starlight. "Madame Probin is an excellent nurse, and her son Pierre is a stout strong fellow, and can help in lifting him when he gets worse; and to-morrow I must call on the English chaplain, and interest him in his story, poor fellow. I don't see we can do any more for him. Oh, by-the-by, he asked if you would go and see him again to-morrow?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Then I will take you; but I fear your day has been too much for you."

"Do not let us talk of it," she returned with a shudder; and Grey thought she pressed closer

to him. "Such days age one; but I think they teach one something too. Poor Walter! I am sure he is penitent;" but neither to him nor to any one but her mother did she ever speak of what had passed between her and the poor sinner.

CHAPTER III.

DOLLIE'S VIGIL.

THE next day Dollie paid her promised visit; but Walter seemed in a feverish stupor, and scarcely recognised her, and she returned home sadly disappointed and downcast. Mr. Mayne, the English chaplain at Lesponts, had also called, but his ministrations had hardly elicited a response. Whether he was confused or sullen no one could tell; but the citadel of the soul seemed closed.

Moved by a sense of helplessness and depression at the misery by which she found herself surrounded, and fettered by a promise she hardly knew how to perform, Dollie became grave and absent. Mr. Lyndhurst was necessarily much engaged, and Bertie had become a wanderer on the face of the earth, and brought back every day Belgian sand and dust on the

soles of his feet, and hung about the rooms day after day looking moody and tired and far from companionable, until Dollie grew sick of solitude and her own thoughts.

So one day she crept up into the dressing-room where Mary lay sleeping, braving Justine and Charlotte; and when Mary woke she found her beside her, looking very meek and tired.

"Dear Dollie, you ought not to be here; Dr. Arnaud has forbidden any one but the nurses," remonstrated her friend.

"Then I will be one of the nurses too," returned Dollie decidedly. "I shall tell Dr. Arnaud so when he comes. Why, look at Charlotte; her eyes are quite red and swollen from fatigue, and you are looking so grave and pale that I scarcely recognise our bright-faced Aunt Mary; but I will not be treated any longer like a child, and ordered to be quiet, and to keep out of the way;" and Dollie's tones waxed ominously vehement, despite their lowness. "She is my mother's aunt, and I insist on being with her sometimes."

"You are very wrong and very childish, Dollie," replied Mary with a flush on her pale

face, for the girl's pertinacity troubled her. "Well, I have no right to forbid you; but you must speak to Dr. Arnaud;" and then she turned away wearily. Was it the strain of these painful watchings, or some secret presentiment of coming trouble, that was beginning to oppress her spirits so heavily?

Dr. Arnaud began to suspect the former reason. He therefore yielded a suave consent when Dollie preferred her modest little petition in the prettiest French she could muster. Charlotte and Mary were so tired, might she not help them a little by keeping watch sometimes?

"Mais oui, certainement," replied the little doctor. "If mademoiselle will be reasonable and tranquil and tread softly and not raise her voice above the ghost of a whisper; silence, repose—that is all that can be done for madame."

"Yes, yes, I understand all that," replied Dollie hastily; and she stole away to carry the good news to Mary, while Dr. Arnaud muttered, under his trim moustache, sundry exclamations of astonishment concerning "ces

demoiselles Anglaises. C'est inconcevable, c'est incroyable—voici une chose étrange," Justine heard him murmur, "cette jeune fille là." Bien, thou art behind the times, Pierre Gaston Arnaud." And ever after he spoke of "cette blonde demoiselle avec les cheveux magnifiques" with a certain respect in his tone.

Poor little Dollie! she nearly repented of her selfwill when she found herself on the other side of the heavy curtains. The grey-haired recumbent figure, lying so prostrate among the down pillows, the unconscious muttering, the sudden starts and tremors of delirium, the room orderly and darkened, Justine with severe disapproving face, going to and fro with list slippers, filled her with secret dismay. If it were so terrible by day, what must the nights be? No wonder Charlotte shrank back from such vigils and left them to Mary! It was Mary on whom the night watch now devolved, while Charlotte or Justine slept soundly in the adjoining room.

"Dear Mary, you have such nerve, such courage, and I am such a coward," Charlotte would say; "I cannot remain with ma pauvre

Tante alone at night; I should be terrified out of my senses; and Justine says the same. By day it seems less terrible;" and Charlotte's blue eyes grew frightened and pathetic as a child's.

"It does not alarm me," returned Mary quietly; and she spoke the truth; but none the less did she dread the weariness and monotony of those endless nights. Her strength was great, her constitution good; but six days and nights, with only broken snatches of sleep, were enough to try the most practised nurse. It was with a sense of relief, therefore, that she learned that on the evening in question Dollie insisted on taking the earlier part of the watch.

"Charlotte and Justine must go to bed, and you must have a good long nap on the dressing-room couch," pleaded Dollie. "If we loop back the curtains I shall feel as though you are in the same room with me. If I take that arm-chair against the wall I can see you plainly, and then if I am uneasy I can just say, 'Mary! Mary!' and you will come."

"But you don't know how lonely it is: all

in the château sleeping, and no one but yourself to listen to that sad talk. You are not used to it; your mother would not like it, Dollie."

"My mother would like me to do my duty," returned Dollie stoutly, and speaking all the more firmly because of secret qualms within. What if she were frightened? Was she going to own her cowardice to Mary? She must share the watching, and wait her opportunity for Walter's sake. She had promised, and no terror, no amount of fatigue or difficulty, should turn her from her purpose; for Dollie had a touch of Puritan blood in her, and could degenerate into sheer obstinacy on occasions.

It so happened that it had been a quiet day with the invalid. Dr. Arnaud had paid his evening visit, and had expressed himself more contented with the condition of his patient. "I trust you will have a fair night," he had said; but neither to Mary nor Charlotte did he hint his conjecture of an approaching crisis. "It may be reason and death within the next twenty-four hours, or there may be no lucid interval at all," he said to himself. Dollie was not in the room when he added a final charge

or two; neither did he suspect for a moment that there would be any change of nurse for the night. Some one was always sleeping within call, he knew that; and nothing more could be done than had been tried already.

"I have prepared her. When the end comes she will be ready for any emergency," he thought, with a half-compassionate half-admiring glance at Mary's composed face. "My best nurse is tired, but to-morrow, unless a change comes, she will rest, and la blonde demoiselle will take her place; and then he went off and had a long whispered talk with Charlotte in the dim hall underneath the swinging hall lamp.

Bertie strolled out of the morning-room, and heard the final words—

"Good-night, mon amie. I may tell Hortense, then?"

"Yes, if you think it right, Dr. Arnaud."

"Très bien! To-morrow or the next day; what does it matter? I have thy promise, mon amie. Gaston and Jean Jacques will not long want a mother. Hortense is excellent, but she is a disciplinarian—a little hard—dur—

what do you call it? She has prejudices; Madame Arnaud had none."

"And you are quite sure, Dr. Arnaud?" whispered a bashful voice.

"Quoi—am I sure of what? Of your goodness, mon ange?"

"Confound it all!" said Bertie, waking up to a sense of eavesdropping, and very nearly laughing outright. The sound of his retreating footsteps startled Charlotte, and she scudded away like a frightened hare, while Dr. Arnaud drew on his thread gloves complacently.

"Va, for les convenances, this English courting is not unpleasant," he said to himself as he lighted his cigar and stepped out into the courtyard.

"Madame Arnaud had a fine figure and a large dot; but one remembered sometimes that her parents were plebeian. But Mademoiselle Charlotte has charming manners—such sensibility, such softness, such confiding ways. My little Jean Jacques, thy father has done well for thee and thy brother. Hortense may grumble, but one can but be firm. Thou knowest how to manage women, and thy own

ménage, Pierre Arnaud," he finished, quite oblivious of the fact that he had been notoriously henpecked by his former wife, and had been sister-ridden ever since.

Meanwhile Charlotte had betaken herself, all smiles and blushes, to Dollie's room. Dollie, who was robing herself in her blue dressing-gown, listened to her confused recital with an averted disdainful face.

"Do you mean to tell me, Charlotte, that you are seriously contemplating marriage with Dr. Arnaud?"

"My dear Dollie, I have just told you all about it. 'Will you be ma bonne amie, and the mother of my poor little Gaston and Jean Jacques?' that is what he said. 'You are Protestant, I am Catholic; but that need be no hindrance. The priests are no friends of mine; thou shalt have religion for both, thou shalt teach me. I shall be an apt scholar. I shall have the grande passion like an Englishman. Thou shalt avow a tendresse for me.' He said all that, Dollie."

"And you have forgotten *him*—Captain Hervey?" and, as Charlotte commenced weep-

ing and said, "Never, never, dear Dollie!" she went on severely—

"How can you be so weak, so fickle, Charlotte? What is a little French doctor to compare with an English officer, a hero like Captain Hervey? If such an one had loved me, had chosen me out of the whole world, had given me his faithful heart, I would have kept true to him living or dead all my life. I would have mourned for him like a widow all the rest of my days," cried Dollie, with her blue eyes kindling. Charlotte was absolutely cowed by her vehemence.

"So I did, dear Dollie. I wore mourning; the best crape at eleven and ninepence—yards and yards of it for ever so long. People said it suited my complexion; as if I cared for that! I cried my eyes out," continued the little woman; "but nothing would bring Percival back to life; there he is, my hero in his grave on Cathcart Hill; and here I am, a foolish little creature, but so lonely, Dollie;" and here Charlotte's voice became almost too pathetic. Dollie's heart began to soften in spite of herself.

"When one is lonely, one seeks distraction; a friend appears a good thing. I have no one in the wide world but la pauvre Tante, and she will not be long here. Dr. Arnaud has been my good friend; he has shown affection and respect. My heart warms to his motherless children."

"And you love him?"

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders. "Mon enfant, you must not be so romantic. I have been young once, and loved; but I think I have buried sentiment in Percival's grave. I like Dr. Arnaud. I have a respect for him. He pays me charming compliments. He is a good man. He is well off. I have a moderate dot. Dites donc, where is the objection?"

"I make you my curtsey, Madame Arnaud the Second!" returned Dollie mockingly, with her blue robe floating into all manner of graceful folds. "As for me, I don't want to make objections. Dry your eyes, Charlotte; you must keep them bright for your French lover. When Dr. Arnaud comes, I shall curtsey to him also. I shall say: 'I congratulate you,

Monsieur; you will have a charming wife. Jean Jacques will have an affectionate mother.' Two halves make one whole; you can muster a heart between you! good, excellent, my dear Charlotte! He pays you plenty of compliments; what can you desire more? Adieu, bonne nuit! and plenty of sugared dreams to you!" and wicked Dollie ran off, leaving poor Charlotte open-eyed with astonishment.

This little passage of arms refreshed Dollie. She looked so bright-eyed and determined when she made her appearance in the dressing-room, that Mary grew quite subdued. She watched her, growing more drowsy every minute; while Dollie's needles flashed through the silken sock. "Knit one, purl one," she said sleepily, before she fell into a sound slumber.

So Mary slept, and Dollie sat erect in the great arm-chair against the wall, dividing her attention between her knitting, the fire, and the great carved bedstead. Now and then a movement made her heart beat faster; and she would steal on tiptoe and stand for a moment looking down on her helpless charge, longing

and yet dreading to hear some sound break the stillness.

She grew more used to it presently, and began to knit up all sorts of vague thoughts with her silk. Pleasant dreams began to flit before her imagination; scenes of reconciliation, peaceful endings to a life so fitful and so full of woe, forgiveness sought and obtained, through her influence as peacemaker.

Now, to the end of her life Dollie steadily averred that she never closed her eyes, or slept a single moment, that night; but, whatever might be her convictions on the subject, one thing was certain—that before very long a fair head was nodding against the velvet cushions, and that the knitting needles had somehow found their way to the floor.

For Dollie was young, and had a healthy appetite for sleep; and had never known the drowsy stillness of a sick-room; and the pine knots were diffusing a spicy odour, and spluttering pleasantly every now and then; and Mary was breathing as softly and evenly as a child. And so—and so the silk unravelled itself, and Dollie's golden head nid-nodded

like a buttercup in a breeze, and all her wits went woolgathering like young lambs at grass.

And how it came to pass she did not know, but all at once she thought she was in the green parlour in Abercrombie Road, and that her mother was calling to her, "Dollie, Dollie;" and starting up in a fright, with her eyes wide open, she heard it again, only in weaker tones, "Dollie, Dollie," and found it proceeded from the bed.

Poor little Dollie! how her heart went pit-a-pat as she crossed the room! for there was Mrs. Reid leaning on her elbow, and regarding her with a strange fixed look, and yet with something of her old kindness in her eyes.

"Dollie, is that you, my dear?" The tones were very feeble and low. Dollie's heart gave a great leap of joy. She knew her, then; she spoke in her old voice; was the opportunity come so soon? Oh! if Mary would only go on sleeping—if she could have her to herself a little while.

"Yes, dear Aunt Reid, it is I," she said; but her voice trembled so, she could hardly speak.

"Are you better? Will you let me give you this?" handing her the composing draught that was put in readiness beside her; but Mrs. Reid waved it away with a movement of impatience, and sank back wearily on her pillows.

"Not yet," she said feebly; "that is what they give to make me sleep, and I have something I want to say first. How long have you been here, Dollie? I have been watching you for some time, poor little one; how tired you were! why have they let you do this?"

"I wanted to be with you, dear aunt." She had never called her by that name before, but now it seemed to come naturally.

"It is not you who have been nursing me? I thought—I thought, but I am not sure, that it was Mary who was always beside me."

"She never left you, except for a little rest," returned Dollie earnestly; "she has been with you night and day."

"So I thought. Was there no one else—no one, Dollie?"

"No one but Charlotte and Justine, and sometimes Dr. Arnaud."

"And no one else?" persisted the sick

woman; and now a bewildered look came into her eyes. "When I am very ill I get confused; but surely—oh yes, I know he was here too."

"Do you mean Walter?" she whispered; and as Mrs. Reid closed her eyes, and her lips seemed to form "Yes," something seemed to rise to Dollie's throat and almost choke her. Must she speak—should she dare? Was not the opportunity too good to be lost? And yet, if she should kill her! "O God! give me wisdom," faltered the poor child; and then, before she knew, the words came rolling out.

"Walter! Ah no." That was what she was saying; and there were tears running down her cheeks before she had finished.

"Walter is ill too; he will not live long; Dr. Arnaud told us so."

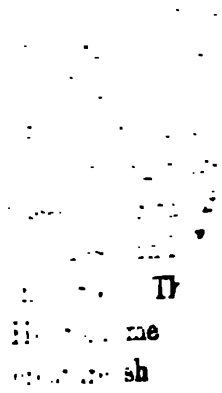
"Walter ill!" Were the words groaned, or simply breathed? How could Dollie through her blinding tears see the fine trembling that passed over the livid face?

"Yes, and Mally is dead, and his little child too. They called her Belle, after you. He told me all about it—what a dear little creature she was, and how she had your eyes.

"He said it was a punishment because of his wicked life, and then he cried so, and seemed so sorry; he said there was no hope, that it was too late to ask your forgiveness, that he had killed you, and broken your heart, that his mother and his God had cast him off, and that there was nothing for him in this world and the next.

"Hush! you shall not speak—not yet," went on Dollie, with a sob. "Do you know what I told him? 'Do not cry, Walter'—that is what I said. 'Do you say it is too late? There is no such word in all God's world—mothers are not like that. I will go to her; I will watch till her poor brain wakes up and she understands and can hear me, and I will tell her you are sorry; and she shall send you her love and forgiveness to cheer you on your dying bed——'"

"Dollie, how dare you? Oh, Dollie, and I trusted you so!" and there was poor Mary standing by the bed, with her face pale with fright and her limbs shaking. "How could you —how could you——" but Mrs. Reid's voice stopped her.



"Mary! come here, Mary. In all the world I have no one to depend upon but you; I know I can trust you,—is this true, all—all that this girl has said?"

"Yes, yes, my poor dear; it must be true;" and Mary knelt on the coverlet, and stretched out her strong protecting arms over the agonised creature, as though she would shield her.

"Then bring my son home to die under his mother's roof;" and as she said this the strength of her voice relaxed, and as she fell back upon the pillow, her face was as the face of the dead.

CHAPTER IV.

AT LAST.

HER face was as the face of the dead, but not yet was the broken heart at rest. They must needs call her back to life and her sorrow again—not until the appointed time comes can the weary ones of earth lay down their cross and take their long sleep. The time had not yet come for Isabel Reid—a few more hours, a few more days—that was what they gave her.

There was wild confusion that night in the château. Grey, waking from sleep, heard hurrying footsteps along the corridor, and dressing hastily, found Dollie crouching outside the door of the sick-room crying as if her heart would break.

"She is dead, and I have killed her," she said, looking up in his face with such woe-begone eyes that Grey felt quite frightened for

her. "Mary and Charlotte and Justine are all in there, but they can do nothing—nothing. I have told her about Walter, and killed her."

"Nonsense," he returned vigorously — for though things were serious, he would not have her talking like that. "Have they sent for Dr. Arnaud? it may be a fainting fit, you know;" and then he pushed past her and made his way unceremoniously into the room, putting the frightened women aside.

A moment's observation confirmed him in his surmise. "All right—go on with your remedies, while I fetch Dr. Arnaud," he said to Mary, who, even at this moment, looked alert and composed. He took no more notice of the poor little penitent in the blue robe—time was too precious for that. Dollie could hear him unbolting the great oak door, and striding out into the darkness; and the promptitude of the action gave her a certain sense of comfort—perhaps, after all, she was not dead!

The poor child was still on guard when he returned with Dr. Arnaud; she looked after them piteously when they entered, leaving her

still outside. But she was not to be left long without comfort; not many minutes passed before she felt a light touch on her arm, and there was Grey looking at her with a world of pity in his eyes.

Poor Dollie! She tried to gasp out, "How is she," but her tongue refused to articulate; she could only clasp her hands in an agony of suspense and doubt; but he understood the unuttered question.

"Don't look like that," he said kindly; "things are not so bad after all. Consciousness is returning." And as Dollie covered her face with an exclamation of thankfulness, he continued briskly, "Now I cannot leave you here in the cold any longer; there is a fire in the dressing-room; you must come there, and Romany shall make you some coffee—come;" and before Dollie could answer, he had gently lifted her from her low position, and in another moment she found herself in the arm-chair, stretching out her numb hands over the welcome blaze, already half comforted by the warmth and brightness.

The heavy curtains were closed; through

the thick folds they could faintly distinguish the low tones and movements in the adjoining room; there was the couch from which poor Mary had risen to a new shock and terror. Grey quietly moved away, and after a short interval returned with the cup of steaming coffee. How grateful it was to Dollie—shivering in the early dawn of a wintry morning. "Now, tell me all about it," he said quietly, as he took the empty cup and replenished the blaze, and Dollie obeyed as readily as a child.

"Do you think it was very wrong," she asked meekly, when she had finished.

Grey hesitated a moment; if he had spoken out his thoughts he would have said—

"What childishness—what folly—what inconceivable imprudence—to tell that to a woman just waking from her brain-fever! Could any one in their senses be so utterly ignorant? You are an honest-hearted and well-meaning little blunderer; that is what you are, you foolish Dollie!" But what he really did say was this—

"It was a risk—but you meant it for the best. I think Providence sometimes takes our

mistakes and turns them to account; good may come out of all this."

"Do you really think so?" she asked breathlessly.

"I am sure of it. Now promise me not to fret any more; you were frightened, you see; and that made you feel so bad. Dr. Arnaud will not leave the house for some hours. Now you must go to your own room and try and sleep a little, and by-and-by we will talk again about this;" and after a little more persuasion Dollie yielded.

The day wore on—it was an anxious one to all in the château. There were long consultations in the dressing-room between Dr. Arnaud, Mary, and Grey. Mrs. Reid had recovered, but not to speech; life seemed slowly ebbing; but as she lay her eyes followed Mary wistfully—weary sunken eyes, yet with a gleam of entreaty in them. Towards evening Mary could bear it no longer, and she followed Dr. Arnaud into the next room.

Grey was there; he had promised Mary to linger within reach.

"I can endure it no longer," she said; and

her voice was very moved. "You fear, you hesitate, Dr. Arnaud; you say it will be bad for both of them. But I tell you my honour is at stake—a dying command is imperative; you must go for Walter, both of you, and bring him home."

"Mademoiselle, je vous donne ma parole, que——"

"Stay, Monsieur, you must hear me. I have thought—I have thought until my head seems bursting;" and she put her hand up to her forehead. "Listen to me, both of you. 'Mary, there is no one in the world that I can depend on but you.' Alas! that was what she said; was it not pitiful? 'Bring my son home, that he may die under his mother's roof.' What could be plainer?"

"I tell you it will kill them both," returned the little doctor angrily.

"Monsieur, she is dying now; one can see it in her face. What will a few days or hours matter in comparison with peace and rest of mind? All day long her eyes have called to me; they say, Remember I have trusted you; where is my son? There is the night coming,

and how am I to bear their pleading? Kill her indeed! Why, I tell you," continued Mary, with a sort of passion in her voice, "that she cannot die. Until he comes you will keep her in torture, hovering on the borders of life and death. Now I shall go back to her and say to-morrow he will come, and she will believe me, and her poor eyes will close. On your peril, then, if you fail to bring him;" and then she turned herself quietly round and left them.

Dr. Arnaud shrugged his shoulders. "Est il possible? Mademoiselle makes one's hair to stand on end; one has to obey her and commit murder; it will be a case for hanging to bring him out of his bed, to introduce him into that room," with a wave of his hand and another shrug. "Madame, I have brought Monsieur your son, behold him. He has been a goat, a scapegrace—bon ciel! the prodigal himself; embrace him. Make the scene—what can follow but the deluge? He bien! I wash my hands; I make them clean; I protest; and I obey."

"It is an unlucky business; but I suppose

she is right," returned Grey, who found himself somewhat moved by Mary's eloquence. If it had been Dollie—well, perhaps he might hesitate; but Mary, so calm and quiet and reasonable! he had a sort of conviction that she must be right after all.

And that night the poor staring eyes closed, and Mary laid her weary head on the same pillow as she sat beside the bed, and slept too; and for once there was peace and something of rest in the sick-room.

But with morning came revived consciousness and restlessness; bodily weakness was great, but the dormant faculties of the brain roused up and asserted themselves. Again the wistful glance followed Mary; the ears seemed strained to listen; at every footstep, at every sound Mary noticed the nervous twitch or convulsive start; the hands seemed groping for something on the coverlet.

"No, he has not come yet," Mary would say, softly hushing her like a child; "you must be good and patient; you know you can trust us," and then the head would turn on the pillow again with a weary sigh.

It was late in the afternoon when Mary heard the wheels of a fiacre in the courtyard, and then a slight commotion in the entry, and knew they had brought him. Mrs. Reid had heard it too; her eyes beckoned Mary at once.

"Fetch him!" that was all she said; but how the poor face quivered with expectation! how the hands groped and worked on the coverlet!

Mary hesitated a moment, and then she looked at Justine meaningly, and left the room.

How long it seemed—minutes, hours—before he reached that door! Mary watched him anxiously as he commenced his toilsome ascent leaning on Grey's arm, and followed by the little doctor grumbling at every step.

"Ciel!" they heard him mutter; "Quelle bêtise!—thou art a disgrace to thy profession, Pierre Arnaud, to permit such doings;" and there was a fresh groan and shrug at every pause.

He stood at last on the threshold of his mother's room—a worn shabby figure, panting and breathless, with the great drops of per-

spiration standing on his forehead. "Mother, I have come home to die!" that was what he said; and at the word "mother," a great light came into her eyes, and all her features quivered with ecstasy.

"Walter!" she cried feebly, and tried to raise herself and could not; and stretched out her trembling arms. "Walter, my son, my son; come back to God and me!"

And as he sank, half in repentance and half in feebleness beside the bed, the weak hand touched his hair and lingered there. What was this they heard her whisper?—"For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

For a little while they left them undisturbed; they had nothing to dread now. It was the last flicker of life—they knew that; but how peaceful were those closing hours!

They had placed him where her dying eyes might rest upon his face; now and then he stroked her hand, or called her mother; and then that strange sweet smile came to her lips, but she seldom spoke. Once they heard her murmur, "My baby, our baby, Marmaduke!"

Was she tracing in that worn, bowed figure and sunken face the bold beauty of her long-lost boy Walter?

"Mother, tell me once again that you forgive me before you die," he cried; and then again she smiled. And now there was a change upon her face.

Forgiven! oh yes; what need to tell him that, when she had cradled his head upon her dying breast, and laid her thin cheek to his? Forgiven! when such a smile as that greeted him? Even now, when speech was past, she signed to him to kiss her; but, as his lips touched hers, there was a sigh, a slight quiver of the face—the soul of Isabel Reid was at rest.

CHAPTER V.

BETWEEN THE LIGHTS.

NEARLY a fortnight had elapsed since the Chateau de St. Aubert had lost its mistress; and since then another sad catastrophe had happened. Poor Walter had only survived his mother five days; what Dr. Arnaud had secretly feared had come to pass — he had broken a bloodvessel during one of his paroxysms of coughing; and in his enfeebled condition there had been no rally, and the end had been very sudden.

Grey and Mary had nursed him; and during the last few hours Dollie had crept in to bid her ill-fated cousin good-bye. There had been no smile or word of recognition; but Grey, who was bending over him, was sure that the white lips had formed themselves into the words, "God bless her!" and he cheered her greatly by assuring her of this.

"You see good has come out of evil after all," Grey said in his quiet way, as he and Dollie stood together over the morning-room fire. The next day he and Charlotte were to start for England, to convey the mother and son to their resting-place in Crome churchyard; for such were Mrs. Reid's instructions for herself. It was doubtful whether Grey would return to the chateau; but Bertie was to remain to watch over the two girls, and, if necessary, to escort them to London. Dollie had written to her mother, begging to be recalled at once; but Mary was too utterly spent to do anything but lie on the sofa and sleep. The shock of Walter's sudden death had utterly broken her down after her anxious watch and nursing. "Sleep, chère mademoiselle; nature must have its way. You have spent your substance for the present; the vital energies are exhausted. In a few days you will be refreshed, revived, re-born like the phœnix. Now you must be like a little child, an infant, and sleep and eat, and do nothing at all." And Dr. Arnaud was right; for a few days Mary did literally nothing but sleep.

This was Grey's last night in the chateau, and he knew it. Charlotte was upstairs making her sad preparations, and Mary was keeping her own room. Bertie was strolling up and down the avenue in the moonlight in company with his cigar; and Dollie, in her black dress, was hanging over the morning-room fire, looking very dull and subdued, when Grey came in and found her.

There had been a little desultory talk between them, and then Grey had launched off into graver subjects.

"After all, good has come out of evil," he said; "uncertain as it was, it has not turned out such a mistake; she might have died any moment, and so might he. One cannot judge of results in such a case."

"I am glad you think so," returned Dollie earnestly. "Do you know what I tell myself? Now they will meet in heaven reconciled; there will be nothing to make right, to explain—first the mother's forgiveness, then God's. Somehow they seem to go together."

"Truly we may hope so."

"Yes, of course; there is no forgiveness

without repentance; to repent means to get up and do something; not only to be sorry, but to make the step forward. I explain it badly, but this is what I mean—when Walter came to his mother, he found his Father too."

Grey bowed his head; somehow he had no answer ready. A young man's reticence approaches these subjects reluctantly.

"He did the right thing," went on Dollie dreamily; she was talking to herself more than him. "God would not be hard on him, because he was too ill to pray; we think too much of forms, of mere words. He was sorry, and came home; and then he lay and suffered. Ah, poor Walter! how he suffered! now it is all right, and they have met; and he is showing her little Belle—and, oh dear! one must not think too much," as a recollection of Mally and her wretched end recurred to her mind.

Grey thought it better to turn her thoughts.

"Don't let us judge. Do you know what I heard a clergyman say once?—that if we were ever fortunate enough to reach heaven, we shall encounter three surprises."

"Well?" interrogated Dollie, and her eyes grew bright with feeling.

"Our first surprise will be," returned Grey very slowly, "to miss many that we fully expected to see there; our second surprise, to find many that we never thought to meet there; and the third will be to find ourselves there;" and as Dollie hung her head, he quickly changed the subject.

"I wonder when we shall meet again;" that was what he said after a few minutes' silence."

Dollie, who was thinking deeply, looked up a little startled.

"You will not be long gone; Charlotte says four or five days, not longer."

"I am not thinking of returning here," was the unexpected rejoinder, "unless circumstances are very different from what I imagine them to be. I must get back to my chambers and work."

"But Charlotte——" stammered Dollie. Somehow this view of the case had never occurred to her; it was odd, and not quite pleasant, to think of bidding Mr. Lyndhurst goodbye. After all, he had been very kind—kinder

than she liked to remember—especially during the last few days; what would she and Mary have done without him—so quiet, so helpful, yet so unobtrusive?

"Charlotte cannot travel alone," she said the next instant.

"Then Dr. Arnaud must fetch her," replied Grey, with a quizzical smile; for both he and Bertie were immensely amused at this Anglo-Belgique alliance. "What is the good of a fiancé if he is not at the disposal of his fair lady. Poor Charlotte! the 'funeral baked meats do coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.' Poor little soul, she is a perfect Niobe!"

"You see she has lived here so long, and was really attached to Mrs. Reid. In spite of her affectations, Charlotte has plenty of heart."

"Yes, and by-and-by it will be given to Dr. Arnaud and those droll brown-faced little boys of his. Did you ever behold such a scene?" continued Grey, with a smile at the remembrance—"'My sons, embrace this lady who has promised to be your mother; salute her, Jean Jacques, and thou, Ton-ton chéri.'

I think Ton-ton chéri hung back and put his thumb in his mouth."

"It was droll, but I thought it rather touching at the same time," returned Dollie. "Charlotte looked very pretty and motherly, and her red eyes did not matter. Dr. Arnaud is not so bad, after all."

"No; he is clever and fair-dealing. And after all, there is no accounting for tastes. So you see England will be our next meeting-place," continued Grey with pardonable egotism. "I wonder how soon I may venture to call at Trevilian Terrace, Abercrombie Road."

Dollie changed colour a little at that. "My mother will be very pleased to see you, and Mr. Bertie too," she returned very primly, and pursing up her lips. Her manner was not quite encouraging; but then she knew her mother's horror of young men. "What will she say? Oh, how I wish he would keep away, at least for a month or two," she thought, and then blushed at her own ingratitude.

But Mr. Lyndhurst, like a wise man, took no notice of her obvious confusion.

"I shall come very soon," he announced decidedly. "I am longing to make your mother's acquaintance. I have few friends, and not many houses are open to me. Now I must wish you good-bye," he went on, and Dollie thought she heard a sigh. "This has been a sad ending to a pleasant visit, but I think it has made us all know each other better; it is worth a whole season of ballroom intimacy," continued Grey, with a forced smile, for he hated to part with the girl. "Ah well! good-bye; I shall not see you to-morrow;" and then he hesitated and said, "God bless you!" but in such a low tone that she hardly caught it, and looked at her a little strangely, she thought, and left the room.

This conversation had taken place five days ago, and since then she and Mary and Bertie had been alone.

What quiet days they had seemed! how silent and deserted the old chateau with its closed rooms! Justine had joined the other servants; the great red-baized door shut in Katchen's scolding voice and the voluble Flemish talk of the others. Now and then

Dollie would glide through them to feed and pet her favourite pigeons, but generally the three sat quietly together in the morning-room, working or reading or talking low in the twilight. At night the girls would go up together hand in hand, their black dresses flowing behind them; Bertie would watch them from the hall; at the top of the staircase they would turn round and wish him a subdued good-night, as he stood there under the swinging oil-lamp.

Dollie used to feel dull and *de trop* at times. Somehow Mary and Bertie always had so much to say to each other; now and then she fell out of the conversation, and could not regain her place; the others did not seem to notice her silence much. Mary would certainly appeal to her at times, but Bertie would go on eagerly with his subject. It was all right of course, but it made Dollie a trifle sad; she began, unconsciously to herself, to miss a certain kind face; if somebody were there, she thought, she would never sit silent and neglected. Little attentions that she had hardly noticed were recalled now to mind.

"A friend was a nice thing, after all," she said to herself, with a spice of discontent in her thoughts.

But if Dollie found it dull, they were halcyon days to Mary and Bertie. Never before had they been so much together, had they enjoyed such unrestrained intercourse.

To Mary it was simply delicious—a new experience in her life—to lean back in her easy-chair, and do nothing but rest and be waited on by Dollie and Bertie. As Dr. Arnaud prophesied, nature effected its own cure. Mary slept as placidly as a new-born baby the first two or three days, and then her tired eyes grew bright again, and her languid frame vigorous and alert. "Now we have our chère Mademoiselle Marie back again," exclaimed the little doctor, rubbing his hands with satisfaction; and to Bertie he expressed afterwards his surprise and admiration at "this physique superbe, this constitution so robust, this mind so admirably balanced and self-composed—this specimen, in short, of a perfect Englishwoman."

One evening they were sitting together as

usual; the girls in their low chairs with their feet on the rug; Bertie opposite, with the book from which he had been reading aloud lying unopened on his knee; the story was an interesting one, but, much to Dollie's regret, they had strayed off into talk as usual. Bertie had been volunteering some information about his life at Stoneyhurst, about which he expressed himself in a somewhat lugubrious fashion, which Mary was striving hard to combat.

"The one fault seems to me," she said decidedly, "that it is too comfortable and luxurious a life; you do as you like from morning to night; as far as work goes, you are as fine a gentleman as Sir Charles himself."

"Ralph and I work three hours every day —from breakfast to luncheon," replied Bertie half sulkily. "I don't call a tutor's life particularly easy; it is grind, grind, with no special results. It is not that Ralph is without brains, but he is indolent and desultory."

"But when the morning work is over, you are free for the rest of the day," persisted Mary; "you and Ralph seem to have a fine

time of it—you fish and shoot and ride, and in the evening enjoy the best society; while poor Grey is shut up in his den with only law books for companions."

"I don't call that a fair comparison," argued Bertie; "I only wish Grey and I could change places; his work is harder, of course, but then there is some chance of getting on. Here I am, very comfortable, I grant you, but only a tutor on eighty pounds a year."

"Yes, but you will not always be a tutor," returned Mary hastily, for there was a meaning inflection in Bertie's voice. "Sir Charles is rich, and has great influence, and Ralph is his only child. Do you recollect how grateful he was when Ralph had scarlet fever and you helped to nurse him? Many tutors would have been afraid of infection and have only thought of themselves."

"Oh, nonsense!" was the answer, for Bertie hated to be reminded of his good deeds. He had been very much commended and patted on the back for his behaviour at the time, and had won both Sir Charles' and his wife's hearts by his devotion to the invalid. "What

is the good of bringing that up again and making such a fuss over it? It was all in the day's work; one need not make a merit of doing one's duty."

But though Bertie spoke crossly enough, he was secretly pleased that Mary should recall it. He remembered how anxious she and Maurice had been, and how even Mrs. St. John had written to him and enclosed a list of directions for disinfectants.

"Is Stoneyhurst a pretty place?" interrupted Dollie, who was tired of keeping silence. How she wished they would go on with the book! But no; Bertie liked better to watch Mary. In his eyes she had never looked nicer than she did this evening. Her new black dress suited her; her slight paleness only made her look interesting; and the softness of her grey eyes was pleasant to see. What was there about her face that he loved so? She had not half Dollie's attractions, and yet in his mind there was no comparison.

He roused himself rather reluctantly to answer Dollie's question.

"Is it a pretty place? Well, I suppose so.

There are plenty of fir-woods, and the walks are nice. The Hall is not a bad sort of place: there is a big park, and the garden is all laid out in terraces. Lady Emily is as proud as a peacock about her garden! I wonder what Charlotte would say to see her in her old hat and shawl pottering among her roses. Charlotte would not think much of her toilette."

It must be confessed that Bertie was not a good hand at description. Dollie tried in vain to get some idea of Stoneyhurst. "The big park and the terraces and the fir-woods"—she could not frame it somehow in her own mind.

"But the house itself?" she persisted. "You are so tiresome, Mr. Bertie; you never will give one a proper notion of a place."

"Oh! the house is like most other houses," he returned indifferently; "a great red-brick place, with lots of windows, and a lodge, with a rhododendron shrubbery. Why do you want to know?" he went on provokingly; "the drawing-room is as big as a barrack, and has three fireplaces, and the chairs are good for a nap."

"We won't ask him any more questions,

Dollie," returned Mary, laughing; "he is in one of his bad moods, when there is no getting anything out of him. I will tell you all about it. There is a picture-gallery upstairs, and a certain Lady Cecilia Howard in a yellow satin with a collaret of pearls, who walks, in red-heeled shoes, when all good people are asleep; and an old gentleman in a periwig and plum-coloured velvet coat, who is said to carry his head under his arm on Hallowe'en; and all sorts of interesting curiosities; and there is the blue room, where Sir Charles sits; and the yellow drawing-room; and the damask room, which is Lady Emily's; and the octagon room, where a certain sulky young gentleman, who shall be nameless, spends his hard-working life; and—and——"

"Why, you seem to know it all as though you lived there!" exclaimed Dollie, opening her eyes, at which Mary blushed; but Bertie broke in, in a little whirl of affected anger—

"Oh yes, you describe it very well, and you are right to laugh at me; but who would work harder than I if I could get a chance? That is what I say. I cannot go on teaching

Ralph for ever; and yet what is a fellow to do? A navvy can turn his thews and sinews to account; but just look at me? I am stronger than most fellows; I can ride, shoot, and pull an oar with any man, and yet because I've crammed a little Greek and Latin, I must needs grind at teaching or starve. Take orders, Grey says. No, thank you; no curate's pittance for me. A man must have a vocation for that sort of thing, you know."

"Yes, indeed," returned Mary earnestly; "I am glad you think in that way, Bertie. I could not imagine you a clergyman."

"I am not good enough, am I?" he returned, with a sort of laugh; "rather a poor sort compared with Maurice. Why, he is a 'king among men,' the grandest fellow I have ever known," he continued, with a burst of enthusiasm that brought the tears to Mary's eyes; but she answered him rather sadly—

"I sometimes think that he is too good to live. No, not that exactly, for of course there are other men as good as he; but I fear sometimes that he will wear himself out. Do

you know, Janet writes such poor accounts of him. If I were not going home I should be anxious. By-the-by, I wonder we have not heard from Charlotte. She will surely return to-morrow."

"Justine had a letter, I believe," put in Dollie; "she was very mysterious over it this morning; she and Romany have been busy upstairs all day; but I cannot get anything out of them."

"Ah well, I daresay we shall hear to-morrow," returned Mary complacently. She was in no hurry for Charlotte's return.

With Charlotte would come bustle, movement, the break-up of all this pleasant time; then would be the return, the parting with Bertie, the long blank of months during which she would not see him or hear from him. If they could only write to each other sometimes; but what would Janet say if he were to propose such a thing? And Mary sighed as she thought of the home criticism that would attack such an unconventional proceeding on her or Bertie's part. That was the worst of these sort of understandings; they had no

rights or privileges to counterbalance their drawbacks.

Mary sighed, and Bertie echoed the sigh. Too well he understood it. He could read her heart as clearly as his own. He knew they must part soon; that in all honour he must leave her without one word or pledge of affection.

What would Maurice say if he were to induce her to engage herself to him, when the engagement might extend over an indefinite number of years. And yet he thought that he could answer for her as well as himself that they would be happier so.

What if, after all, he were to speak to her and ask her to decide for them both? He knew already what she would say. She would bind herself to him, and take up her life and her work cheerfully, and put faith in herself and him. She would not be impatient or fret, as other women would. She would wait for him until her brown hair got grey streaks in it, and the freshness of her youth would be gone; and he would never hear a word of complaint or regret. If he dare only venture!

if Maurice were not to look sternly at him and call him dishonourable!

"I think I must do it, that I must say one word to her. It will half break my heart to leave her this time," thought poor Bertie, growing suddenly weak at the sound of Mary's sigh. After all, the matter was for them to decide; no brother, not even Maurice, had a right to stand between them if they loved each other!

"I will get her alone to-morrow, and have it all out with her before Charlotte comes," he decided, not knowing, poor fellow! that the golden opportunity had already gone. Had he spoken, who knows, things might have been different between him and Mary.

But even as the gleam of the sudden resolution flashed into his eyes, Dollie sat erect in her chair and put herself in a listening attitude.

"There, did you hear it? I was sure there were wheels in the courtyard. Listen—ah, that is Charlotte's knock," as there was a thundering peal at the hall door. "That accounts for Justine's mystery; she knew all

about it this morning. It is one of Charlotte's surprises, bless her fussy little heart!"

Was it Charlotte? Mary and Bertie exchanged glances, and as though by a sudden impulse moved closer together.

"Oh, Mary, is our pleasant time all over?" cried Bertie in a tone of regret, and he took her hand; somehow the action seemed natural. Mary did not draw hers away. There they stood together, poor young creatures! hand in hand, with their Nemesis waiting for them outside, like the avenging angel, to drive them out of paradise.

Dollie did not notice them; she was putting back the thick tapestry curtain that hung before the door. Any change was welcome to her, even Charlotte's arrival. She opened the door and went out into the dark entry, and ran—dear little soul—straight into her mother's arms!

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

"BUT where is Aunt Mary? why does she not come out to welcome us?" exclaimed a brisk, decided voice, breaking somewhere out of the darkness. Mary gave a great start, and loosened Bertie's hold of her hand as though she had been stung. Again they exchanged glances—this time almost of dismay. The voice was Janet's.

"What is in the wind now? why has she come to spoil everything?" groaned Bertie. Poor fellow! this sudden arrival of his enemy filled him with all manner of dire forebodings. Were the Fates against him? "Mary, what does it mean?" he cried, trying to detain her.

"Hush, how can we know?" but Mary had turned a little pale too. "Here I am, Janet," she said, striving to speak naturally, and ad-

vancing to the tall cloaked figure that stood peering impatiently into the dim corners.

Bertie followed her sulkily enough. What a scene the hall presented at that moment! There was Charlotte chattering volubly to Romany and the driver of the fiacre; Justine and Ursula were bringing in wraps and packages; on the oak bench in the farthest corner were Dollie and her mother, closely locked in each other's arms; and there was Mary taking off Janet's cloak, and trying to look pleased at this sudden invasion.

Janet laid aside her wrappings willingly enough. What a handsome creature she looked, as she stood smoothing her glossy hair with both hands under the dim light!

"Now, I am ready," she said, taking Mary's arm, but scarcely noticing Bertie. She swept past him on her way to the morning-room, with her head erect, and a strange sort of eagerness on her pale face; the folds of her long dress quite enveloped and extinguished Mary.

"Dear Janet, this is a surprise," said Mary mildly, as her sister-in-law again stooped over

her and kissed her cheek. Such demonstration was rare with Janet, save with her husband. She was seldom prodigal of caresses; now her fingers stroked her face in quite a motherly fashion.

"Poor Aunt Mary! how pale and thin you look! what would Maurice say if he saw you now? We must take care of you, and give you plenty of attention and petting to make you forget all this dreadful time."

"Thank you, Janet," returned Mary gratefully, "but I have had a nice time of rest, and am feeling myself again—ready for any amount of work you or Maurice like to give me. Now you must tell me what has brought you all this distance, and what could have induced you to leave Maurice and the children?"

"We wanted to talk to you, Mary, and Maurice was not well enough to come;" and now a very perceptible shade of embarrassment crossed her face. Mary noticed it.

"Is not Maurice well?" she asked anxiously; and again the cloud rested on Janet's brow.

"Is he ever well?" she demanded in the low, vehement tone that Mary had somehow

learned to dread; for it always betokened a stormy argument or mood of discontent. "He is worse than usual; his cough will not let him rest at night, and yet he will not consent to see a doctor. I got frightened last week—he looked so ill and exhausted—and spoke privately to Dr. Raven. I felt I could not any longer bear the anxiety."

"Well?" interrogated Mary, as Janet paused and turned her dark eyes moodily to the fire, "you were perfectly right; and what did Dr. Raven say?"

"Oh, it was the same old story," and her bosom heaved with repressed feeling; "he is killing himself, that is all. He will leave me a widow, and his five children fatherless."

"Now, Janet, you know this is not right," returned Mary, taking her hand, for she knew how much to allow for exaggeration. "I am sure Dr. Raven never said that."

"No, of course not, he only left me to infer it. He said Maurice was killing himself by inches—he used that very expression, Mary; he said there was no cause for present anxiety, as far as he could judge, for he had not

examined him; but he had seen a great deal of him lately, and made up his mind that he was the wrong man in the wrong place."

"You mean the air does not suit him?"

"The want of air I mean, and the work. There has been a terrible amount of sickness lately—low fevers, and two or three very serious cases. Maurice has hardly given himself time to take his meals, and when he comes home at night he is too exhausted to sleep; and then there is the cough."

"Oh dear!" sighed Mary; "how badly you have wanted me, both of you. If I had been there Maurice need not have worked so hard."

"You would have done your best, I know; but you could not have lightened his burden much in such a parish as ours, so much responsibility rests on the curate. And that is not all—both Lettice and Rosie have been ill.

"Ill! you told me in your last letter that they were poorly—but ill?" Poor Aunt Mary! were anxieties never to cease? Lettice too, who was Aunt Mary's darling!

"Yes, it was the same sort of low fever that was going about—a feverish cold, Dr. Raven called it—but I know it was more than that. Lettice kept her bed five days, and she looks very poorly still. Of course, as Dr. Raven says, Lime Street is not exactly the place for delicate children."

"But how could you think of leaving them if Lettice be not quite strong?" asked Mary in some astonishment. Janet was too devoted a wife and mother to lightly desert her part.

"Ah! thereby hangs a tale," returned Mrs. St. John with a little forced laugh. "I have a long story to tell, and I must make sure that we shall not be interrupted. Where is my room? we might go there."

"But you are in need of some refreshment. Where are the others? I have hardly spoken to Mrs. Maynard; and what has become of Charlotte?"

"Of course they are all in their own rooms," returned Janet decidedly. "Mrs. Maynard will have no eyes for any one but her daughter for the next hour; we were just in time for table d'hôte at Ligne, and that is only an

hour and a half ago. I want nothing but you, Aunt Mary," again linking her arm in Mary's.

"Then we will ring for Justine and find out which room has been prepared for you," was the cheerful rejoinder. Mary was making the best of it, but what had become of Bertie? She found Janet tolerably correct in her surmise. Charlotte was bustling about in the upper regions, with two maids to wait on her; and Dollie was closely shut up with her mother.

"Madame has had tea served for her; would madame require the same?" asked Justine, looking with awe and admiration at madame's regal beauty. No, Janet did not desire tea; she moved forward eagerly, still holding Mary affectionately by the arm. Once Mary looked back; yes, surely out of that dim corner some figure was slowly moving; yes, there he was rumpling his hair and looking after them wistfully, as they moved away from him farther and farther, until he could see them no more. A gleam of firelight, a closing door, and he was left out in the darkness.

Meanwhile in a quaint little octagon room at the end of the corridor called la chambre verte Dollie was making tea for her mother.

Mrs. Maynard sat in the great arm-chair drawn up close to the fire; her widow's bonnet was laid aside; the firelight gleamed on her reddish-brown hair and worn delicate face; her eyes brightened, and then grew dim with feeling, as they rested on Dollie's happy face.

"My darling, how thankful I am to see you again!" she exclaimed.

"Not more than I am to see you, my dear little mother," returned Dollie, flying to her for the sixth time, and covering her with kisses. "Where is your cap, motherling? You don't half look yourself without it. Your hair is prettier than mine, but you look too young—oh, far too young to be my mother. I shall get it out, if it be at the very bottom of that great yellow portmanteau; you must look just as you do at home; and then I will sit at your feet and admire you;" and Dollie acted up to her words.

"My darling, it is for me to admire you;" and indeed the widow would hardly take her

eyes off her treasure; would not any mother be proud of such a daughter, she thought, as she watched her girl's graceful movements about the room. Dollie's figure was very pretty, and the little head was so heavily weighted with its fair plaits, and her face was so bright and animated, that one forgot the high cheek bones. "But my Dollie looks different somehow," she continued; "a little older and more womanly."

"Nonsense, mother," and then Dollie blushed suddenly under that affectionate scrutiny, for was there not a secret, a tiresome little secret, to be told some time? Mrs. Maynard saw the blush, and a pang crossed her; what new experience had befallen her girl in these five long weeks of absence? and then she put the thought away from her in true coward fashion, and made believe it was her fancy, and that the fire had suddenly scorched Dollie's fair cheek, and turned her attention resolutely to another subject that she had at heart, and about which she must talk to her girl.

"Well, Dollie, you never told me that you

were surprised to see me here; I have travelled all these miles, just to see my little daughter and fetch her home."

"Mother, how good of you! but I should have come home safely all the same if you had sent for me; you got my letter, I suppose."

"Yes, they forwarded it to Crome. Were you not astonished that I summoned up courage and went to the funeral. Mr. and Mrs. St. John persuaded me to go. Do you know, I was grieved to see how ill Mr. St. John is looking."

"He works too hard, I suppose," returned Dollie, and then she continued eagerly: "I am glad you went, mother; it would have pleased poor Mrs. Reid if she could have known it. Were you not sorry when you heard what had happened—that you had not accepted her invitation, I mean?"

"Yes, Dollie, it will be a matter of lasting regret to me," replied her mother gravely. "Poor Aunt Isabel! how little I knew her and her sorrows! Mr. Lyndhurst and Charlotte told me all about her illness, and poor Walter—my Dollie did a piece of angel's work there."

"Mr. Lyndhurst!" exclaimed the girl involuntarily, but this time her head was bent down, and her mother did not see the blush.

"Yes, he was kind enough to give me a good many particulars; he seems a good sort of young man," continued Mrs. Maynard innocently, "pleasant and gentlemanly, somewhat above the average. I took rather a fancy to him."

"I am glad of that," returned Dollie rather incoherently; "at least, I mean he is all that; but Crome Park—how did you like that, mother?"

"Why, it is a fine old place, Dollie, a grand old house. Mary is a fortunate girl."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Dollie, almost starting to her feet; for the moment she had forgotten all about Mrs. Reid's property.

"I mean," returned Mrs. Maynard, smiling, "that your friend will be no mean heiress. Mrs. Reid has left her Crome Park, and the greater portion of her money."

"Crome Park to Mary!" in spite of Charlotte's hints she could scarcely believe her ears.

"Yes, the will was a very strange one; hardly a satisfactory one. Evidently my poor aunt was a woman of strong prejudices; she had likes and dislikes.

"There is a handsome allowance for Charlotte, the same she had promised her during her lifetime; and another large allowance to be paid monthly to her poor son, but this will revert to Mary.

"To Mr. St. John she has only left one hundred a year, and the same to her husband's connections, Grey and Cuthbert Lyndhurst, and also to you; to myself she has been more generous, for there is an annuity of three hundred a year settled on me for my life; you see I was her own niece, Dollie."

"Yes, mother; but how kind, how thoughtful! she knew you were poor, and had to do without comforts to which you had been accustomed. Why, mother, four hundred a year between us, and the pension besides! why, we shall be quite rich! We can leave that horrid Abercrombie Road; we can travel, and do all manner of nice things;" and Dollie clapped her hands as though all the riches of

Crœsus were in her clasp; it never occurred to her for a moment to envy Mary.

"It has relieved me from a great anxiety; but, Dollie, if I die, you will be poor again; the pension and annuity will die too."

"As though I cared what would happen to me then!" returned Dollie scornfully, as she threw her arms round her mother's fragile figure. "If I were poor I could work, but I suppose a person could live on a hundred a year."

"Yes, yes, and of course a hundred things may happen before that," observed Mrs. Maynard, feeling that the time would soon come when she must part with her child. "But, Dollie, my dear, there is one part of the will I do not understand, and which made Mr. Lyndhurst look grave—Crome Park is left to Miss St. John, but only on one queer condition, that she does not marry Cuthbert Lyndhurst."

"Mother!" burst from Dollie's indignant lips; and then a frightened look came over her face.

"Can you explain it, my dear? is there anything between her and this young man?

What can my aunt mean? She evidently dislikes him, and yet she has left him an equal portion with his brother; what can be her motive in acting so strangely?"

"Oh, I do not know; she has always been hard upon him, always. I think Mrs. St. John talked to her when she was staying here last year; you know how hard she can be, mother; they say that he is indolent, desultory, irresponsible, and all that sort of thing. Mrs. St. John has always been terribly afraid of some entanglement between him and Mary."

"But, my dear, if this were true—you are so young to judge of in such cases. Miss St. John seems a very superior person; they may be right in saying that he is not good enough for her."

"But who would be good enough for her?" returned Dollie with a burst of feeling; "Mother, you do not know how I have grown to love her; she is so different to other people! she is so thoughtful, so unselfish, so truly humble-minded!"

"Just so, and her sister may therefore be

correct in thinking that Mr. Cuthbert Lyndhurst is far from being her equal."

"Has she been talking to you too?" cried Dollie in despair. "She is so clever, she can twist a thing round and make you see it from her point of view; she is not fair to him; and poor Mrs. Reid was hard upon him too. He is very nice; why," continued Dollie, taking up the cudgels most warmly for her poor Adonis, "he is one of the nicest young men I know" (she had never seen above three in her life); "he has plenty in him when you come to know him, and he is so kind and bright and likable, and so full of fun!"

Mrs. Maynard regarded her daughter with a careful brow.

"This is not a very long list of moral qualities, Dollie; if it were his brother now—no one could object to him. And you really think Miss St. John cares for the poor fellow?"

"I am sure they care very much for each other; when Mary is in the room Mr. Bertie seems to have eyes for no other person. Oh, mother, I am certain that they want to be

engaged, only he is so poor. How cruel, how desperately cruel Mrs. Reid has been!"

"Nay, my dear, you must not be so hard on my poor aunt. Consider the circumstances—she was a conscientious, almost a morbidly conscientious woman; the property is large; as she says in her will, she was anxious to find an heir who should be a faithful steward of her bounty, one who would carry out her wishes and care for good works; if Miss St. John married, she would be in subjection to her husband; Mrs. Reid was therefore only acting up to her sense of duty in stipulating that this husband was not to be Cuthbert Lyndhurst."

"But why should she not have made Mr. St. John her heir?"

"Their church views differed. I do not think she cared for him much, and she had conceived such a dislike for his wife. Charlotte tells me Mary won her heart from the first—'I have never known a sounder, sweeter nature,' she said to her before the first week was over."

Dollie leant her cheek on her hand and sighed. Here was a complication; presently she looked up and said with a little spirit—

"It is all no use; she won't take the money; she will never give him up."

"But, my dear!"

"It will just bring things to a crisis, that is all. They are not so poor now; at least Mr. Bertie has a hundred a year left to him; they will be engaged and wait for him to get on a little better; and Crome Park will have no mistress. By-the-by, mother," continued Dollie, opening her eyes very wide, "you have not told me what the will says in case Mary declines the property."

Mrs. Maynard shook her head. "No one knows about that; there is a sealed codicil that is not to be touched; no one but the lawyer knows what provision she has made for such an emergency, and his lips are silenced; if we could only peep into that codicil, Dollie! Mrs. St. John is certain that, in the event of Mary's refusal to inherit, the property would be left to the many charitable institutions in which Mrs. Reid was interested. Mr. St. John thinks the same; but no one can be sure." And again Dollie bent her head upon her hands to think.

By-and-by her mother touched her softly.

"Well, little one, what now?" for the girl was in a brown study, and her eyes had a fixed far-off look; she woke up slowly at the sound of her mother's voice.

"I am trying to piece it all out," she said at last very slowly; "I am trying to put myself in Mary's place, and to feel how she feels. I know what Mrs. St. John will say to her; she will persuade her into things; she will put the matter so cleverly that she will drive her into a corner; she will appeal to her feeling, to her unselfishness; she will ask her to sacrifice herself for the sake of her brother and his children; and she will say it over and over, and there will be no silencing her; this is why she has come, that she may have her to herself;" and when she had said this she rose very stiffly and slowly to her feet.

"Where are you going, my dear?" for there was a sudden look of determination on her face.

"I am going to Mary, mother," was Dollie's prompt rejoinder; "and I shall tell her that all the sisters or brothers in the world must not make her give up Mr. Bertie."

CHAPTER VII.

"HE IS NOT WORTHY OF YOU."

"BUT Mary——"

"Janet, will you be merciful and leave me? No one shall coerce me in this. Do I not tell you that this is a matter of life and death to me? why will you not believe me?" and in Mary's eyes there was a sad, almost a hunted look, and her lips were tightly pressed together as though in severe bodily suffering.

"Yes, I will go directly, but you must hear me first. What is there in this young man that you must sacrifice us all to him?"

"I love him," was the answer.

"For shame, Mary! you make me blush for you. Is this our sister Mary who is so lost to all feelings of propriety? How can you be so unfeminine as to avow partiality for a young man who, by your own account, has

never said one word to you?" and Janet's face was dark with passion, and her eyes flashed angrily. For a whole hour had she been arguing—pleading even with tears—and yet there was no result. "Mary, you are beside yourself; you know this is wrong."

"I love him and he loves me," returned Mary in the same calm, inflexible tones. "Words! oh yes, one would have them too, but when heart speaks to heart—when one knows and understands—you cannot put things wrong between us, Janet. I tell you we understand each other."

"But there is no engagement, no pledge, no promise—not one word to bind you to him," persisted Janet; she felt that she must abandon her ground and take up another point in her argument. "Even if you love him, there is nothing to prevent your changing your mind."

"Nothing on earth can change it."

"He cannot reproach you," went on Mrs. St. John, affecting not to hear her; "it will not be jilting or casting him off; if you were engaged to him, could I ask you to do any-

thing so dishonourable? I am a wife myself—I gave up everything I valued in life to marry Maurice."

"And why may I not do the same, Janet? why should you try to interfere with my life? You have had yours; is there a love on earth like Maurice's? Why are you not satisfied with him and your own happiness, and leave me and Bertie alone?"

"Because I cannot see you committing suicide, and not try to save you. He is not worthy of you; he is——"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake spare me all that again!" returned Mary almost with a gesture of despair. "How can I help your opinion of him? You are prejudiced, and have set Mrs. Reid against him; cruel, cruel—ah, you did me an evil turn there, Janet."

"I meant it for the best," returned Mrs. St. John, with an angry flush, for the words stung her. Had she been cruel to Mary? nay, she had not intended that. "How could I know what would happen? how could I foresee such things?"

"Still you were unjust," was Mary's answer;

"you have always been harsh in your estimate of him, and yet he has never done you harm. Janet, when you talk against him—when you speak in the way you are doing now—you anger me so that I am ready to vow to you what I have already vowed to myself, that I will never marry any one but Bertie."

There was an instant's silence, and then Mary repeated her words, this time more firmly—"No, I will never marry any one but him."

"Well, and what then?" and Janet threw up her head, and a quick gleam passed over her face.

"I do not understand you," replied Mary, looking at her.

"What if you do not marry any other man? am I forcing you to take a husband? Good heavens, Mary, that you should think such things of me! I, who am Maurice's wife! Should I be so false—so utterly false to my creed—as to tell you to marry where you did not love? No, no, better live single all your life—better a thousand times live and die an old maid than that."

"Then for once we agree, Janet."

"Oh, Mary, do not look at me like that; do not be cold, so unlike yourself. I will not talk any more against Bertie; you shall think of him as you will, and I will not contradict you; but why need you marry him? why need you marry any one? can you not make yourself happy with us?"

An inexplicable look passed over Mary's sad face, but she did not answer; only in the depths of her heart she cried, "Oh, my darling! my darling! happy without you?—never, never."

"How often women make up their minds to live single!" continued Janet; "sometimes they become Sisters; they devote themselves to our work; they are not unhappy. Why do I demand such a sacrifice, you ask me,—it is because I cannot stand by and see you throwing yourself away."

"Again!" exclaimed Mary wearily.

"Yes, again and again, until I can make you see with my eyes. Am I thinking of myself? Do I covet these riches for my own sake? You know I am not so base; I would

starve rather than interfere with your happiness; but, Mary, when I think of Maurice, I could find it in my heart to kneel to you."

"Janet, Janet!" and Mary covered her face with her hands; she wanted to shut out that beautiful pleading face from her view, but the eloquent voice was not to be silenced.

"What! you turn away—you will not hear me!" exclaimed Janet in such a tone of agony that Mary could hardly bear it. "You will refuse Crome, and throw yourself away upon this worthless lad! Mary, how can you be so selfish, so hard-hearted. Do you know what will happen? Maurice will stay where he is; he will be too poor to move. What is a hundred a year more when there are five mouths to feed, and all our little capital eaten up? This year we are in debt—ah! you did not know that. Never mind, we shall pinch and set ourselves straight; we shall have enough; there will be no fear of starving. But he will not move; every month he will grow weaker—more unfit for his work; then will come decline; by-and-by they will give us no hope—it will be too late for change, for rest,

then—Oh, Mary, Mary!" and Janet suddenly threw herself upon the ground and caught hold of her dress, "for my husband's, for Maurice's sake, do not refuse Crome."

"Janet, you are breaking my heart."

"No, no, it is mine that is to be broken—mine and my children's. What will Lettice do without her father? How am I to live when the treasure of my heart is taken from me? What is your love compared to mine, Mary, who have known his every thought for fourteen years—my sainted, noble husband!"

"Janet, will you rise? I cannot speak to you like this. Hush! there is some one at the door; no one must see you in this state;" and as Dollie's tap was impatiently repeated, she half raised half pushed her to her feet. "Go into that room," pointing to the inner door that connected hers and Dollie's,—for Janet had insisted on accompanying Mary to her own room,—and Janet, exhausted with her own passion, and sobbing hysterically, made haste to hide herself.

When Dollie advanced into the room, she looked round her suspiciously; she was not in

time to catch sight of the retreating skirts of her enemy, but her quick instinct detected a sort of disturbance in the atmosphere.

"Where is she?" she asked in a quick eager whisper, and would have peeped through the curtained archway that divided the rooms, but Mary stopped her.

"Come here, dear, I want to speak to you," she said; and as Dollie reluctantly obeyed Mary put her two hands upon her shoulders, and looked at her a moment without speaking, as though she were trying to read her thoughts.

She was somewhat the taller of the two; and as she stood thus, the younger girl looking up into her face, saw that there was a drawn, pallid look about her mouth, and that her eyes were full of a great sadness; but what could be calmer than her voice?

"Dear Dollie, you have heard it all, and you are come to talk to me; is it not so?" and as Dollie nodded vehemently she went on in the same passive tones.

"You want to tell me not to give him up —to be true to my own heart and his. Ah,

yes! I can read your thoughts. Now, Dollie, listen to me a moment. I am sure you love me a little?"

"I love you dearly, Aunt Mary;" and Dollie looked ready to cry.

"Then do not speak to me to-night—no—not one word—I could not bear it," as Dollie seemed inclined to interrupt her.

"Ah! you do not know what I have been through. I have had a great shock; and then Janet would talk. I asked her to go away again and again, but there was no stopping her. There were her words, and there were my thoughts, and they seemed to beat together in my brain. It is quiet I want, Dollie—quiet for this one night."

"And you shall have it, my darling!" cried the warm-hearted girl, suddenly putting her arms round Mary's neck, and stroking her face like a child's. "Don't fret about it, Mary; they shall not make you unhappy; no one shall make you give him up for all the stupid parks in existence. There, there! I won't say another word; you shall not be teased by me;" and Dollie clapped her hands over her own

ears and ran out of the room, that Mary might not be troubled to answer.

In another moment she would have been flying down the corridor, but some one who was lurking outside the door caught her in boyish fashion by the sleeve, and stopped her.

"Oh, do wait a moment," implored a voice, Bertie's, speaking huskily out of the dark corner. "I have been waiting here ever so long, and I cannot make it out; I saw you go in just now, and a moment ago Mrs. St. John brushed quite close to me."

"Mrs. St. John!"

"Yes; she did not see me; she was crying, I think; and she went in there," pointing to a door nearly opposite them. "There is something in the wind; I said so to Mary. Dear Miss Maynard, will you do me a favour? will you take a message to Mary? ask her to come out and speak to me a moment."

"I dare not, Mr. Bertie; please do not ask me."

"But why not? it is not so very late," he

pleaded; "only just ten. They have locked up the morning-room, but there is still a fire in the hall; the lamp is out, but there will be light enough to see each other's faces. Tell her to come to me a moment, for I will not sleep until I have found out what all this means."

"I dare not," persisted Dollie, shrinking from him. "She looks so ill, and I am sure her head aches badly; and she has begged me to leave her in quiet."

"Then I will knock at the door myself," returned Bertie recklessly; and he would certainly have acted on his words, but it opened suddenly, and Mary's pale face appeared.

"Good-night, Bertie," she said.

"Will you come, Mary?" he asked eagerly.

"No, I heard what you said to Dollie; I am sorry, but I cannot come. Will you not say good-night to me?" and she held out to him a cold hand, and looked quietly and sadly in his face.

"What does she mean? why does she look so unlike herself?" exclaimed the poor fellow,

when the door was again shut, and they heard the key turning in the lock. "She has never refused to speak to me before. You are not going to leave me too, Miss Maynard?" he continued reproachfully, as Dollie faltered out "Good-night."

"No, I will have an answer; by heavens! I will not be treated in this fashion!" and before Dollie could quite comprehend what he was about, he had tucked her arm unceremoniously under his and was leading her down the staircase.

"Mr. Bertie, I must go back to my mother," cried Dollie, in real affright; but she was no match for his determined mood.

"You shall go back to her in five minutes," he returned, taking up the poker and making the pine knots blaze till every corner of the great hall was brilliant with firelight.

"Why are you afraid of me to-night? you were kinder to me that evening when you were Hebe, and brought me all manner of good things;" and Bertie's eyes looked persuasive and affectionate. Dollie glanced up the dark staircase, and then she hesitated; perhaps, after

all, she could keep her mother waiting for five minutes.

"Don't speak so loudly; you do not know that she may not be listening."

"Who? Mrs. St. John?"

Dollie nodded.

"Why has she come?" he asked eagerly. "Directly I heard her voice I knew something was up; she has not travelled all these miles to no purpose. I have never heard of her leaving her husband and children before."

"Mr. St. John is not well."

"All the more reason for her to stay with him."

"Ah! but she wanted to talk to Mary, and to bring her the news. What! they have not told you, Mr. Bertie?" and Dollie looked at him half frightened, half puzzled. How was she to avoid answering his questions?

"You forget that every one has been avoiding me all the evening," he returned angrily. "Look here, Miss Maynard, you need not be afraid to tell me; of course I know there is something wrong — something about money and Mary." He pronounced the last word hesitatingly, and with a peculiar softness of

intonation; and then a thought struck him, and he said very quickly, "I see—she is Mrs. Reid's heir;" and again Dollie nodded. How cleverly he had guessed! oh, if she could slip away now!

"I am not surprised," he continued after a moment; but Dollie thought he looked rather pale, as though the news was unwelcome. "One could see what a fancy she had taken to her, and how she trusted her. Well, she might have told me herself, and allowed me to congratulate her."

"Perhaps she has no wish to be congratulated," returned Dollie.

"Why not?" he asked, turning sharply round on her. "Is it not a matter of congratulation for a girl so poor as Mary to be made mistress of a grand place like Crome? Nay, she ought to have told me," he continued, leaning his head on his hand, and looking rather sadly at the fire. "She need not have thought that I was such a poor beggar that I should not have been glad of it for her sake;" and then he sighed, and looked anything but glad.

"You have something too," went on Dollie,

hardly knowing what to say; and she quickly repeated the list of bequests and legacies that her mother had given her. Bertie brightened up a little as he heard of the moderate sum that was his share.

"Between three or four thousand to each; that will bring us in a hundred a year," he said with some animation; and then he thought again and shook his head and sighed; why, he would not have two hundred a year, and she would be the mistress of Crome!

"What are you two doing there?" said a voice, speaking softly to them from the top of the dark staircase. "Miss Maynard, your mother is seeking you; she has just been to my room. I told her I knew where to find you. Is that Bertie? what a glorious fire! may I warm my hands at it a moment?" and Mrs. St. John advanced to them, looking dignified and graceful, and with no traces of her late emotion perceptible on her face.

Dollie looked at Bertie and fled; it was cowardly, but how was she to help him? and there was her mother waiting—her poor tired little mother!

Bertie made no sort of effort to detain her. He gave an inward groan as Mrs. St. John placed herself tranquilly on the oaken settle, and spread out her white hands to the flame. She took no notice of the young man's discomposure, as he sat rumpling his hair and eyeing her with keen wrathful looks. What did she want with him? What mischief was she going to brew at this hour of the night? For Bertie had an instinctive feeling that this tall graceful woman, with the beautiful hands and the deep voice, was the evil genius of his life.

Presently Mrs. St. John turned to him, and there was a smile upon her face.

"So little Miss Maynard has been telling you the news!"

"What news?" demanded Bertie grumpily, for he would have scorned to understand her.

"All about our dear Mary's good fortune," she returned blandly. "Dear, dear, what an odd stipulation for poor Mrs. Reid to have made! What have you done, Bertie, to get into her bad books in that way?"

"What stipulation? I don't understand you," he inquired; but a faint thumping made

itself felt somewhere in the regions of his heart. What did the woman mean? How he hated her smile!

"I thought you said Miss Maynard had been telling you the news," returned Mrs. St. John in real or affected astonishment—Bertie could not detect which. "Dear me, how very awkward! it is hardly for me to tell you. Old people are crotchety and get fancies in their head sometimes; but that she should have thought such nonsense as that! Well, if you will have it"—for Bertie's grey eyes were literally flashing their question at her—"there is a stipulation—very absurd and unnecessary, as you must allow, and very distressing to poor Mary's sense of modesty—that she cannot inherit Crome without promising first that she will never marry a certain Mr. Cuthbert Lyndhurst."

"Good heavens, you lie, woman!" had almost risen to Bertie's lips as he sprang to his feet, and then he checked himself; and something cold seemed to creep over him—a sense that she was speaking the truth.

Was that what Mary's manner meant? Was that why she had avoided him? He

remembered the coldness of her hand, and the sadness of the look with which she regarded him. Would Mary, his own true-hearted Mary, give him up for this? No, he knew her too well for that. And the flash died out of his eyes, and a great softness came into them.

Janet saw it, and she leaned forward and touched him eagerly.

"Bertie, may I ask you a question? Is there anything, anything" (with a slight emphasis) "between you and Mary?"

"Why do you ask me that? No, you have no right to ask," he returned almost rudely; but she angered him so.

"Ah! but I have a right," she returned, speaking very gently. "She is our sister; we love her better than any one in the world; how can we help desiring her good? When I heard the contents of that will," she went on slowly, evidently choosing her words with difficulty, "and knew of the rich gift that was showered into her lap, I said to my husband: 'Mrs. Reid has done right; she could not have chosen more wisely. Mary will be the Lady Bountiful of the place; she will be the benefactor of old

and young, the friend of rich and poor; she will reign like a queen, for she has a royal nature;' this is what I said to my husband."

Bertie was silent. How was he to answer her? was it not true? But yet his Mary!

"Heaven has been very good to us," went on Janet in the same equable tone. "As my husband says, it is often darkest before dawn. The last few years have been very anxious. I daresay Mary has told you we have been getting poorer and poorer; our little capital eaten away; and Mr. St. John is such a bad man of business—they say the clergy are, as a rule—and so we have sunk rather heavily into debt. And that is not all"—her voice breaking a little in spite of her resolution—"his health is failing; unless he has rest and change, a country cure, and easier work, the doctor fears there will be danger of decline. Think if he were to go into a consumption! and all these little girls, most of them sickly! and now," clasping her hands, "Mary will save us. She is rich—rich; she will come to our aid; she will save Maurice; she will be good to me and the children; she will be our best blessing, our generous, true-

hearted sister." Her manner changed and she stretched out her hands, and as he looked at her in his wrath and pain, her magnificent eyes were full of tears, which slowly brimmed over on her cheeks. "Bertie, you have a good heart; you are a gentleman; do not ruin me and my children; do not come between us and Mary. In robbing her of her fortune you are robbing us all; you are making me a widow and my children fatherless, when a little—a very little —might save his precious life. If you have a heart, and it is not hard as iron, you will go away and leave her to us;" and when she had said this she slowly turned herself from him and went up into the darkness again, leaving him to sit beside the dying logs until far into the night, until his heart grew cold within him, and all the dreams of his life blackened slowly into ashes before his eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

MAURICE'S LETTER.

WHEN Mary had heard Bertie's voice she had gone out to him and had bidden him good night, and had then sent him resolutely away from her, and then she had turned the key in her door, shutting the outer world from her with main force and stress of will; and then she sat down to think.

But first she took Maurice's letter from her pocket and read it.

The envelope was still unopen, as when Janet had handed it to her two hours ago. Since then she had pressed her more than once to peruse it, but Mary had refused. Her brother's words should be sacred to her; she would keep them until she was alone.

Maurice, her own dear brother, could he help her? could any one help her in this awful

strait? What had he said to her? and then she smiled in sad fashion and shook her head at the playful commencement. But before she had finished, the tears were raining down on the paper.

"MY DEAREST MARY," it began, "my bonnie Mary, and so you are to be mistress of Crome! I have had all the children down and have told them. Lettice said nothing, but she turned very pale; evidently the dear child fears to lose you. But Hatty and Rosie and May were more outspoken. 'Will she be as rich as the Shunamite, father?' asked May. We had read the story that evening. I am afraid I was wicked enough to answer her in like fashion, and to assure her that you would have vineyards and olive presses, and men-servants and maid-servants, and oxen and she-asses in abundance; bless their dear little hearts! children are so literal. May actually mistook my fun and believed me. 'What will she do with such a lot of donkeys, father?' she asked; and then Lettice struck in in sober and rather sad earnest: 'Father is only joking, May; he wants us to understand that Aunt Mary is very rich, and will have all she wants, and a grand place to live in, and she will go away, and oh, father——' and here the darling actually trembled like a leaf, and laid her head on my shoulder, for she is weak still and poorly, and I felt she was crying. I tell you this that you may know how Lettice loves you, as indeed they all do.

"Well, we made it all plain presently, and Lettice

cheered up, and we had a long, long talk. Bee interrupted it now and then by calling out in her shrill little voice: 'Mammy, does oo' know auntie is a rich 'oomans—a werry, werry rich 'oomans?' with inimitable waggings of her little head; and in her prayers that evening she said of her own accord, 'Thank God for making auntie rich 'oomans, for ever and for ever, Amen.' Poor babe! as though our riches were to follow us!

"But the rest of us had a grand talk. I wish you could have heard it, Mary. Lettice thought you would build a church; Hatty a hospital for incurable children, because you were so sorry for little lame Jemmie; Rosie's opinion pointed to alm-houses. May was dubious, only they were all to live with you, and drink new milk every day, and have little gardens of their own, and donkey rides, for the child's head still ran on the she-asses; and then I stopped them, and I told them that whether Aunt Mary built churches or founded hospitals, or endowed alm-houses, one thing was certain, that in whatever she did she would regard herself as her Master's steward, and all these rich gifts would be as loans to her, to be laid out in His service. For I know your heart, my darling sister, as I know my own, and while others are congratulating you—poor Janet, for example, but you must bear with her, she is so happy about this—you will be shrinking as though from a burthen, with a full understanding of added work and responsibilities. 'What! all this for me! and souls and bodies perishing round me for lack of a little; this is what you will say to yourself, and your eyes will grow dim, and your heart heavy as though a weight were on it.

"But courage, my beloved! open your arms wide to eceive the Divine bounty; gold is not dross to those vho know how to spend it. Do you remember the arable of the talents?—all for His use, who called the oor His brethren. Mary, you will not fear, not overnuch now.

"One word more, my dear, for I am writing a sadly lisconnected letter, I fear—a sudden thought has struck ne—that condition. What could Mrs. Reid mean? Can there be any ground for such suspicion?

"Men, even brothers, are slow in such matters, and omehow I have always believed our Aunt Mary's heart o be free; but if I be wrong, if there be any inward lisquiet—anything to cause you regret in after life, put way this gift from you; better a peaceful heart than a oyal kingdom. I think you will understand me, dear.

"Now I am weary, and Janet looks at me reproachully. 'What! not finished yet!' her eyes seem to say. No! not till I have blessed you, my own dear sister; here, may God bless you and help you to a right decision! if there be need for decision.—Your loving rother, MAURICE."

The tears were raining down on the paper ow—those last few sentences, how almost llegible they were! Evidently his hand had rembled, shaking either with fatigue or motion; perhaps his cough had troubled im; there was a blot, and the last few words ooked like an old man's writing.

"What if Janet were right, and Maurice should die?"

"If there be any inward disquiet—anything to cause you regret in after life—put away this gift from you." What! he could tell her to do that, when all his grand heart was sunning itself in the prospect of this new gladness, when he was rejoicing from his inmost soul that she was to be the dispenser of such royal gifts. "Open your arms wide to receive the Divine bounty," and then as though by an after-thought and in a sad minor key, "but not at all costs—better a peaceful heart than a kingdom;" it was as though he would say, "Be true first—be generous afterwards."

"Oh, Maurice, Maurice! tell me what I ought to do," cried the poor girl, hiding her face in her hands; and then in thought she was by his side in the old shabby study. Janet and the children were upstairs; he had sent them away; they were alone.

Now she was speaking; now she was telling him all her heart; clear as crystal her thoughts came leaping out under the sunshine of his

eyes; he was holding her hands in his; he was encouraging, aiding her to speak. "No secrets between us; am I not the priest as well as the brother, Mary?"

There, it was all spoken. Now, what would be his answer? would it be, "Cast this temptation from you; overcome your own heart; crucify its best affection; take up your appointed cross of loneliness and heart desolation, and walk in the path that Providence has ordained for your feet"? or would it be, "Be true to yourself, Mary; do not be blinded by a specious sense of duty; self-sacrifice that involves misery to another is not always accepted; do not betray your love for the sake of these riches; live your own sweet life, my sister; God will give us strength to bear our own burdens"? Oh, would he not say all this? Yes! and more than this.

He would send her away from him healed and comforted, not counting the cost, but seeing things as they were with a far-sighted large simplicity, a child-like abiding in a present duty, leaving the vast margins of the future to widen as they would out of the mists.

"To-day do rightly, to-morrow also, but leave results with God;" that is what he taught.

And she and Bertie would be comforted. Stop! let her follow out this thought slowly, carefully. What if the chateau clock were striking midnight? would there not be nights many and long enough in which to rest or grieve? The fire was dying slowly down, but her hands were over her eyes and she did not see it. Darkness—and yet all sorts of images flashed and wavered before her; silence—and yet she could almost hear the throbbing of her own temples, the heavy beatings of her heart. But what of that, when she must think it all out?

She was his wife now: this was the next thought. Their slender incomes united would make such things possible; they would not have to wait long, perhaps not more than a year or two; they would be poor, but neither would mind that much; they were together, and the outer world with its criticism and fashion and cut-and-dried philosophy would be as nothing to them.

How bright would be that hearth-fire!

She would have little to give to others, but out of the fulness of her happy life she would reach out ministering hands to all that needed her. She would go to her daily labour among the sick and suffering and the ignorant; and when her work was over, there would be the evening rest, and the face of her dearest friend to greet her. Hush! let her pass over that quickly.

Peace in their home!—and in the household in Lime Street a growing sense of trouble and despondency, deeper lines on Maurice's face, and the pinching hand of care planting heavier furrows in Janet's white forehead, an added gloom in the dark eyes, a sharper key in the fretful tone.

Maurice would go among his people, and the voice that grew daily weaker would speak the same brave words as of old. There would be no faltering of courage, no change in the sudden sweet smile that always greeted his wife. But Janet, oppressed with the day's struggles, with small sordid cares, and miserly hoardings for some dearly-coveted delicacy for his sickly appetite, would have no answering

smile for him. "Careful and troubled about many things"—alas, poor Janet!—about her husband's failing health, about her children's growing sickliness, about the load of daily-increasing debt that was dragging them down!

No possibility of change now, no relief from the squalid courts and alleys, the smoky atmosphere, no green lanes, no fragrant hedgerows, no song of morning larks for them! Who would hire that worn-out servant, faint with ministering to his Master's brethren? Who looking on that tall stooping figure and hectic flush would bid him come and rest and refresh himself?

Ah! the shadows were growing deeper; he cannot work now—he is dying, nothing can save him; too late—too late now! Whose is this passionate voice breaking out of the darkness, as St. Sauveur's clock chimes one? this groping hand clutching her dress? "What is your love compared to mine, it says, who have known his every thought these fourteen years? Mary, for Maurice's sake! What will Lettice do without her father? How can I live when the desire of my eyes is taken from

me?" The fire is out now; but in the darkness there is a figure kneeling with outstretched arms, as though in mortal agony.

"Anything but this—all that I have, but not Maurice's life, not my only brother! It cannot, it must not be! Bertie, you cannot ask it. I dare not—I dare not!"

The next morning Mary's place was vacant at the breakfast-table; but an hour or two afterwards Dollie encountered Bertie walking disconsolately up and down the passages.

"Mary wants you," she said with a little tremor in her voice, and not daring to look at him lest he should see she had been crying; "she is up there," pointing to the door of the room that had been Mrs. Reid's private sitting-room.

"Mary wants me!" repeated the young man, and there was a blankness and perplexity in his face; and then he looked at her again as though he scarcely understood the message. But as Dollie nodded without speaking—for she dared not betray herself—he darted up the stair, and scarcely waiting for permis-

sion to enter, moved the handle and went in.

Mary walked across the room and gave him her hand, but without speaking; and then he saw that she was not alone. Mrs. St. John was sewing by the window.

"You sent for me, Mary," he said eagerly; but Janet, looking up from her work, saw that his face was almost as pale as Mary's, and that there were dark circles round his eyes.

"Yes," she answered, casting down her eyes, "there was something I ought to have told you last night, only—only——." Her voice shook a little, and she tried to recover it, but he interrupted her.

"But if I know it, Mary?" and as she gave a little start indicative of surprise, he went on, "Mrs. St. John was good enough to enlighten me last night."

"Oh, Janet! and you never told me!" and Mary's tone was a little reproachful. Janet's colour heightened, but she had too much tact to show resentment at this moment.

"If Bertie recollects," she said quietly, "it was Miss Maynard who first informed him of

the news. I interrupted their talk last night, and then found he knew all but the one clause. It was better I should tell him, was it not?" and Mary winced at the meaning tone; but again Bertie struck in—

"Look here, Mary; never mind who told me. I had to know, you see. What does that sort of stuff matter when things are like this? Of course you meant to tell me, and of course I know why you have sent for me; but all the same I will not have you speak."

"But, Bertie——"

"Now, Mary, I will not have it. I mean to spare you; that is what it is. What is the use of being a man if one cannot help a woman? You have sent for me to tell me things must be over between us, that you are going to give me up; but, Mary, you shall not say that to make yourself miserable. I mean to speak first, for nothing on earth could induce me to stand between you and Crome. Do you understand me?"

"Oh, Bertie!" and now Mary's eyes were full of tears, and she could not answer him.

"It is I who am giving you up," went on

the poor fellow, speaking in a half-choked voice; "I have been thinking of it all night, and I knew this morning you would send for me. You have your brother and the children, and—and it would not be right for you to do otherwise. So, though I love you, and shall love you all my life, I would not marry you even if you would have me," breaking off with a lame attempt at a smile. "So you see it is not you, it is I who have done it and given you up."

"Oh, Bertie! How good, how generous you are!" said poor Mary; while Janet, in spite of her antagonism, felt a growing respect for this young man, who was at once so gentle and so manly, and who was trying in his boyish awkward fashion to shield the woman he loved.

"Now, there is nothing more to say; and you must not fret about it, because you have always done what is right and kind, and I shall understand, you know." And as she stretched out her hand silently to him, the gratitude and the wistfulness of her eyes moved him to a recklessness of courage, and he forgot they were not alone.

"Mary, you will let me kiss you once before—before we wish each other good-bye," he said, and there was almost a sob in his voice.

Her only answer was to turn her face to him and let him kiss her on the lips. "God bless you, Mary!" he said; and as she looked up at him trying to frame the word "Good-bye" with her lips, he suddenly threw her hands from him and went hurriedly away.

Mary remained standing for a few minutes where he had left her, and then Janet came up to her and touched her gently.

"Dear Mary, he is gone; he will not come back."

"Gone! and I never said good-bye; I scarcely spoke to him. Are you sure?" and her look was so piteous that all the woman woke in Janet, and she put her arms round the girl.

"Dear, he has acted nobly; he has spared you everything—he has made it so much easier for all of us; you and he will both feel better about it by-and-by; and oh, Mary, you have saved us all!"

"Yes; and Bertie, my Bertie, has gone," returned Mary; and then she turned from her sister and walked feebly to the couch; it was not that she was faint, but that all her strength had suddenly gone from her, and that she could only lie there, spent and utterly exhausted.

Janet did the best she could for her by leaving her alone. Now and then some one came to the door, but she sent them away with a whispered word—"Mary was too tired to talk." Now it was Charlotte with her fussy inquiries, now Dollie with a sorrowful pleading face, and once it was Mrs. Maynard; but Janet was resolute, and refused to open the door.

It was a long weary day for both the women. Janet tried to write to her husband, but the task was too difficult for her; Mary's pale face and closed eyes damped all the triumph of her joy. Maurice must wait; she could find no words for him.

Towards afternoon there were unwonted sounds in the chateau—footsteps passing up and down. Mary raised her head languidly, and looked at Janet.

"Yes, dear," she said, answering that look; "they are bringing down his portmanteau; he is going now. Indeed, Mary," touched by that uncomplaining sadness, "it is better, far better so."

"Yes, yes," she answered; and then rose slowly to her feet and walked to the window. There he was in the courtyard bidding good-bye to Charlotte. Would he look up? He was standing bareheaded, and the sharp east wind was rumpling his fair hair. Yes, he was looking up now; their eyes met; and Mary waved her hand to him. "Good-bye, Bertie, my Bertie," Janet heard her say; and then she went back to her couch, and turned her face to the wall.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CORNER HOUSE IN THE RUE D'EQUERRE.

A FEW days after Bertie's abrupt departure from the Chateau de St. Aubert, Mrs. St. John and Mary returned to England.

Dollie and her mother remained behind, very reluctantly on Dollie's part, but Charlotte had appealed to them with many protestations and tears. In six weeks she was to become the wife of Dr. Pierre Arnaud, and the mistress of the large corner house in the Rue d'Equerre. Would they leave her alone in the great desolate chateau to weep over the memory of ma pauvre Tante? Would they abandon her to Justine's tender mercies at this critical, this most interesting period of her life? When would she more require the good offices, the sympathy, the support of her female friends? This, and much more, did Charlotte

sob forth, to Dollie's secret chagrin and scorn, and to Mrs. Maynard's infinite perplexity, until Mary stepped in with a word or two that weighed down the balance.

"I do think you ought to stay, Dollie," she said one evening when they were alone together. It was two days after she had bidden good-bye to her lover; the first day her strength had been utterly spent, and there had been no effort possible to her; then she had turned her face to the wall and wept, and it had seemed to her as though she had tasted of the bitterness of death.

But the next day she had come among them again, and had sat there very grave and silent, but conveying by her manner that she wished for no expression of sympathy; she looked so ill that Dollie and her mother exchanged glances of dismay and sympathy; Dollie could have fallen on her neck for very love and pity, but a certain passive resistance and constraint on Mary's face forbade her. Once Janet spoke over-tenderly to her, and she had flushed up with sudden irritation.

"What do you mean, Janet?" she had said;

"I am well, quite well;" and soon after that she had asked Dollie to walk out with her. Janet looked after them wistfully, but they did not invite her to join them. When they had gone a little distance, Mary took Dollie's arm and leaned on it rather heavily, but she was very silent.

They had gone in the direction of their first walk towards the cemetery; Dollie, who was in no mood for churchyard musings, would have passed on, but Mary pressed her arm, and gently guided her towards the entrance.

"It is so cold and damp," shivered Dollie, looking up at the grey skies and bare tree-tops; but Mary took no notice.

By-and-by they were sitting on the little bench overlooking the convent graves.

"Sister Veronica, aged twenty — do you remember?" Mary had said very softly, as though some thought struck her, and then she had made that remark, "I do think you ought to stay, Dollie."

"But it will be so horrid remaining behind after all that has happened," returned Dollie,

fidgeting as she spoke. "Do you know, I quite hate the chateau—I feel as though it were haunted; we have been so happy and have had such lovely times, and now everything has ended so miserably;" and Dollie crunched the pebbles impatiently with her feet.

"Yes, it will be very dull," replied Mary, with a sigh, "but all the same I think for poor Charlotte's sake that you ought to do it; it will be so lonely for her, and she has been very kind to us, poor little woman! and the change will do your mother good."

Dollie made a wry face—she was only half convinced.

"But I shall want you every hour of the day, Mary," she said in a coaxing voice. "I never had a sister, and somehow we seem like sisters. I shall be thinking of you, and fretting about you, and—oh dear—I don't think Sister Veronica aged twenty was so much to be pitied, after all; she got over all the horrid part of life so quickly."

Mary smiled—a wan pitiful little smile it was.

"I am not so sure of that, Dollie; perhaps

it is not intended for us to get over the horrid part so quickly; we ought not to 'take ourselves down from the cross'; it is better—" her lip quivered, but she went on quietly, "it is better to live the life intended for us as bravely and as patiently as we can. By-and-by there will be no more pain;" and then her manner changed, and she started up from the bench and walked hurriedly down the narrow path.

"Yes, it is cold, and the air feels as though it were going to snow. Janet was right, and we had better not defer our return after to-morrow. Will you promise me to stay, dear Dollie? It would hurt me for you not to do right; one cannot always please oneself."

"Oh, Mary, what a rebuke you are to me!" returned the younger girl with tears in her eyes. "Stay! I will stay six months if you wish it."

"No, only six weeks — until our poor little Charlotte becomes Madame Arnaud. You must write and tell me about it; everything you do; and how your mother likes Lesponts. You must take her to the Béguinage and Laeken-water; and—and—oh, how

cold it is, Dollie!" and now Mary began to shiver, and wrap herself closer in her mantle.

"And you will write to me, Mary?"

"Yes, yes, of course I shall write. I must tell you about the children and Maurice, and my plans; and when you come back, you and your mother must come to me at Crome, and —and—we shall be so comfortable," but at this point Mary's voice became husky, and she walked on faster. Before they reached the chateau they were overtaken by a sharp hail-storm, and arrived wet and weary, to find Janet waiting for them anxiously in the porch.

"Oh dear! what a dreadful storm! you must be thoroughly drenched," she exclaimed, laying a detaining hand on Mary's wet cloak; but she eluded her grasp.

"Yes, we are very wet, and I think I will go to my room and rest, Janet," and Mrs. St. John let her pass with a sigh.

Dollie had promised to stay, and so she tried to make the best of it. It was very dull seeing Mary off at the station, and walking back alone across the Grande Place; the very carillon vibrated sadly to her ear. How empty the

chateau felt that evening! how trite and meaningless Charlotte's incessant chatter; for once her mother's presence hardly seemed sufficient. The rooms were haunted, but not in ghostly fashion; Grey's dark face lurked in corners; his kind eyes and smile seemed to follow her; the firelight shone on Bertie's fair hair, rumpled into a halo; she could hear his voice—his very words—and Mary answering him.

"Would you like to go to bed, Dollie, my dear?" asked her mother, noting the girl's restlessness. It was better when they got upstairs, and she could put her head on her mother's lap and let her pet and talk to her. What wonder if she were weary and unstrung after all that had happened, thought the widow, and she was very tender and solicitous over her child.

But after a few days it was better; Dollie ceased to miss her friends quite so keenly, and her natural buoyancy asserted itself. She had to do the honours of the chateau to her mother; Charlotte was far, far too busy. She had to act as cicerone, and show her the beauties of the dear old city. She must see all

Dollie's favourite haunts—St. Sauveur's, St. Jacques, Notre Dame, and the Hotel de Ville; and then, but only when all the other sights were exhausted, she took her to Laeken-water and the Béguinage.

How very quiet Dollie was all the walk! She made no answer to her mother's exclamations and little ejaculations of surprise and pleasure. "This is the prettiest walk we have had yet, Dollie," she said quite innocently; "why have you left it to the last?" and Dollie flushed up and looked foolish.

But that night she took heart of grace, and told her little story.

"I thought I ought to have no secrets from you, mother," she said, looking very good and demure: how the widow thrilled and trembled over her girl's recital. The next day she went out alone, and took that walk again. She stood for a long time on the bridge that led to the ivied archway of the Béguinage. "It was here that he told my Dollie that he loved her," she said to herself, and again that thrill had passed over her. Was the danger averted? or should she have to fear for the future?

"And you refused him! you actually said no!" she exclaimed. Now, indeed, her girl was a woman.

"What could I do? One is not obliged to accept people because they ask one," returned Dollie a little loftily. The narrative had excited her; it sounded better in the retrospect. "Of course I was sorry, and I told him so," she went on, feeling all at once as though she had acted very creditably—after all she had not done so badly.

Then suddenly Mrs. Maynard changed colour, and her manner grew very nervous.

"Oh, Dollie, my dear, if you had only written to me! and I have asked him to call—actually to call."

"How could I write about such things?" returned Dollie in a shrill little voice. "Mother, how you do talk! And what does it matter if you have asked him to call? We are very good friends; he has been kind to me, and has done so much for Mary and me; we settled all that—that he was to call, I mean—and that I was to be glad to see him. I daresay he will come, and be dreadfully disappointed to find the

house empty," continued Dollie in the most matter-of-fact way, as though she had refused half a dozen offers, and had settled the same number of disconsolate lovers. And it was after this that Mrs. Maynard had taken her second walk to the Béguinage.

Dollie and her mother found plenty to do all day, and in the evening Dr. Arnaud always came and stopped a couple of hours. He was a brisk wooer, and carried on what he called his "English courtship" with a mixture of bonhommie and gallantry that amused Dollie.

"Oh, Charlotte, how I do wish I could have a lover like Dr. Arnaud," she exclaimed once, to his fiancée's delight. "Mother, would it not be nice? Dr. Arnaud comes in like this," planting her little feet in the first position; "he carries his curly-brimmed hat under his arm, he bows, he flourishes his hand. Mon amie! I trust I find thee well this evening? Jean Jacques and Ton-ton chéri send thee their felicitations, their love. How hast thou passed the day, my Charlotte? how have thy energies diffused themselves?' Is it not so?" and naughty Dollie twirled an imaginary mous-

tache, and assumed a sprightly sentimentality.

"Dear Dollie, you are so droll!" laughed Charlotte, while Mrs. Maynard held up a warning hand.

"Droll! how can you be so hard-hearted, so unsympathetic, mon ange?" mimicked Dollie. "What do you call him when you are alone? Pierre?—Pierre, mon bien-aimé!" and then she leant her dimpled chin on her hand and sighed plaintively. "Mother, it is hard—there is an inequality in fate after all. Why are these blessings denied to me, Dorothy Maynard? Why may I not have a lover as erect as a little tin soldier, with a well-waxed moustache and a head like a highly-finished scrubbing-brush? Can you conceive anything more adorable?"

Once when Charlotte was arraying herself for one of these evening visits, Dollie ran up to her with a coaxing face: "Do let me dress you to-night, Charlotte. I will promise you that Dr. Pierre Arnaud shall go home more in love than ever."

Dr. Arnaud hardly knew his fiancée that

evening, the little witch had so metamorphosed her. Charlotte wore her mourning dress with a muslin kerchief crossed over her bosom; the thin golden hair was tucked up under a little cap; a single white flower nestled at her throat; her blue eyes looked as round and innocent as a child's; a little pink flush tinted her worn cheek.

"Mon ange, comme tu es belle cette nuit! my Charlotte, thou art charmante, adorable!" Dollie heard him whisper; and even Mrs. Maynard averred that Charlotte had never looked better.

It was soon after this that the three went for a week to the gay city of Brussels. Charlotte had bridal purchases to make, and the trip would be a treat to Dollie.

They took lodgings in the Rue de Trône, behind the king's palace, where Dollie had a sunshiny little bedroom with a painted ceiling, and a pink-and-white bed in an alcove.

What descriptions Dollie wrote of that visit—of the park, the cathedral, the picture-galleries! What hours she spent, gazing into

those wonderful shops, with their blaze of colour —of jewels, their fairy-like fabrics and lace!

"There is a street here full of the most gorgeous shops," wrote Dollie; "we are for ever climbing up and down it, Charlotte and I, and we cannot tear ourselves away.

"Aladdin's lamp must have conjured up those marvellous things; everything is a mass of colour; even the confectionery and the flowers are beyond everything! how I wish I could have Fortunatus' purse! There is an emerald tiara that is ravishing, and a dress of cobweb lace that Titania might wear, and a wreath of forget-me-nots in china that take all the colour out of Charlotte's eyes. Oh dear! I never dreamt or imagined that things could be half so beautiful."

And then she went off on another description.

"We have had such a horrid day!" she wrote next; "I am afraid it will haunt me all my life long, but it was all that stupid Charlotte's fault, and she said we ought to go. It was horribly wet, and we went splashing through great pools; there were no shops—nothing but dull-looking streets, and a few people clattering along under their umbrellas.

"The mother wanted to go back; but no—Charlotte said we must not leave Brussels without seeing the W—— Gallery, and actually she compelled us to undergo all the horrors.

"Oh, Mary, such pictures! the work of a madman! —at least his work must have driven him bad. The poor little mother looked quite scared. 'A diseased imagination, Dollie, my dear,' she whispered; 'don't let us stay; these pictures will get into our brain and haunt us!' and she actually put down her veil and walked into the next room. But I was obliged to look; and now the whole thing seems to me like a nightmare —such terrible pictures, Mary! such awful subjects!— genius gone mad and gloating over horrors. My head got confused over it; the whole room seemed full of grotesque figures, writhing limbs, bloodshed, and madness. The very titles were appalling—'Hunger and Madness and Crime,' 'The Resuscitation of a Person Buried Alive,' 'The Suicide,' 'The Vision of a Beheaded Man!' Can you conceive such subjects? there was the face of Lucifer hurled from heaven, so diabolically beautiful that it riveted one's attention; and a Napoleon in the infernal regions—the most perfect impersonation of unyielding pride—it reminded one of a description in Dante.

"I took refuge with the mother at last; for the moral, or rather the immoral, atmosphere seemed to choke me. What right have they to torture healthy minds with the diseased imaginations of a crazy painter? genius that borders on frenzy ought to be deprived of his palette. I perfectly raved as we splashed through the pools again. That night all my dreams were horrid; I found myself wondering what you would say to it all, Mary."

Dollie's letters were very clever and amusing; she wrote all the thoughts that came into her busy little head. By-and-by her topics changed; they were back again at the chateau. There were quiet days—plenty of work, Dr. Arnaud's visits in the evening. Then came the wedding. Dollie wrote that Charlotte had behaved fairly well, and had looked very nice. The great event sobered her; her little affectations had dropped off her — she was quiet, simple, and subdued.

After that they had seen her in her own home, the evening before they left Lesponts. She came running down the staircase to meet them, followed by her youngest stepson. She wore her little cap, and looked flushed and happy.

"Pierre likes me in it," she said simply; and then she patted Gaston on the shoulder. "Is he not a great fellow?" she said, in quite a motherly fashion, looking down affectionately into the queer little brown face. "Make thy bow, Ton-ton chéri;" and Ton-ton chéri made an odd little grimace, and stuck out his brown paw. "They are good boys; they are dear

boys, and I love them and their father dearly," cried the little woman, with sparkling eyes.

"Whom hast thou there, Madame Arnaud?" interposed a brisk voice. "Hé bien! our good friends! my Charlotte, make them welcome. Let us offer them the best hospitality that the house contains. You behold us, madame, mademoiselle, the happiest family in Lesponts. My wife there is our good angel, our beneficent genius. Jean Jacques and Ton-ton chéri cease to weep for a lost mother. Le roi est mort, vive le roi—n'est ce pas? Can we not transpose the sentiment? the mother is dead, yet the mother lives. Bon ciel! how is a man with any degree of heart to interpret such fidelity, such nobleness?"

"Mon ami, coffee is served in the salon, and Hortense waits there," interrupted Charlotte, with a blush and dimple; and her blue eyes rested tenderly on her husband.

"Poor little woman, she is very happy!" observed Mrs. Maynard, as she walked through the silent streets that evening. "Her husband

and those boys adore her. Well, she is not wise, but she has plenty of heart; and men like Dr. Arnaud can put up with a fair amount of coquetry. Perhaps, after all, she will be happier with him than with Captain Hervey."

"Perhaps so," returned Dollie absently; she hardly heard her mother's observation. This was their last evening in Lesponts. Christmas was over and the New Year; they were crossing the Grande Place for the last time; the crescent moon was rising behind the Tourdes Halles; there were bright facets of stars set into the dark wintry sky; a strong wind blew keenly across the market-place. Dollie stood still a moment, and looked round her—at the dark peaked roofs, at the closed shops and cafés, the old mediæval houses. Just then the carillon rang out. "Good-bye," it seemed to say to Dollie; "good-bye, golden days; good-bye, many happy dreams, and things that cannot be; will they come again? will they ever come again?"

"Dollie, my dear, it is too cold to stand," remonstrated the mother gently; and the girl

roused herself obediently, and hurried on. "Good-bye, golden dreams. Ah, poor Mary!" she sighed; "things that cannot be—will they come again? will they come again?"

CHAPTER X.

HOSPITAL SATURDAYS.

It was late on Saturday evening when Mrs. St. John and Mary drove through the crowded streets of the East end of London.

Saturday night in Whitechapel! Mrs. St. John leant back and closed her eyes as though she would shut out the sight, but Mary sat erect and watchful. This was Maurice's battle-field—the scene of his labours.

How well she remembered it! and yet how strange it looked after those long weeks of absence! There were the flaring gaslights; the butchers' shops; the "buy-buy" of the impatient salesmen; the open stalls; the rough, pushing crowds; the pinched faces of anxious men and women; rags and tatters—there they were—tawdry finery; plenty of white-faced babies

trying to find refuge from the bitter wind under the thin shawls—Whitechapel on its gala night—lit up with its diadem of gas—and behind her an old mediæval city, grass-grown and buried in sleep, and a chateau haunted by a dismal memory.

"Oh, Mary, why does it look so much worse to-night?" groaned Janet; but the girl did not answer. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, and a wide, far-away look in her brown eyes. "Good-bye, golden dreams!" what if the carillon had said that to her too; this was the life that was waiting for her.

By-and-by they were standing on the pavement at Lime Street; Mary hung back, and let Janet precede her into the house. The entry was very dark, but she could hear Maurice's fondly-uttered "Welcome home, my wife," before his outstretched arms received her. "Thank God, I have you both again," he said, as he extended a hand to each, and drew them gently in. What a greeting for Aunt Mary then; they were all there—Lettice and Hatty, Rosie and May, down to little

Bee. Janet caught up her darling in a moment, and nearly smothered her with kisses. What a beautiful creature she looked, standing there with her child in her arms, and a sweet smile playing round her lips! Lettice had timidly removed her wraps. The tall figure showed to advantage in the straight, black draperies; some of her dark hair had escaped from its coil; her face looked animated and eager. How it changed and softened as she looked up and caught her husband's eyes! her colour deepened like a girl's; it was just so she looked when he saw her first, and all his honest heart had gone out to her.

"Janet, how well you look! I have never seen you look better," he said; but his voice spoke volumes, and Janet blushed again.

"I am so glad to see you and the children," she said simply, as she moved closer to him; "but you are looking thin, Maurice—no better than when I left you;" and the light suddenly died out of her face.

"Why, of course not," he returned lightly; "I wanted my wife. Children, tell your

mother how much we missed her, and how we longed for her and Aunt Mary. Well, Mary—" and here he held out his hand to her, and looked at her with a kind smile—"so Bee's rich 'ooman has come back!"

"Yes, Maurice, I have come back;" and she lifted her quiet eyes to his; and then she drew May towards her, and beckoned the others who were standing aloof shyly, and said a pleasant word to each.

"Lettice, light the candle for Aunt Mary, and take her up to her room," interrupted her mother, who was watching them. Perhaps she wanted to be alone with her husband—perhaps she noticed that Mary's face was pale, and that there was a tired look in her eyes, and feared that Maurice would notice it. As she spoke, Mary rose rather quickly and followed the child.

A large front room at the top of the house had been allotted to her; it was rather a bare-looking apartment, with three high, narrow windows, and a small iron bedstead. It had brown wainscoted walls and roomy cupboards; the cupboards were full of heterogeneous articles

belonging to Mary's parochial labours—piles of books in neatly-stitched blue calico covers, layers of old threadbare garments patched and repaired for gifts, balls of lists, rag-bags, newspaper cuttings, a formidable medicine-chest, mended toys, and half-finished illuminations. The great round table was full too—a heap of tracts to be covered for distribution lay beside the well-worn copy of Thomas à Kempis; a work-basket; an inkstand; a shabby old desk; and a rag scrap-book, on which some gaudy pictures were pasted—for this room Mary had loved to call her workshop or her hospital, for here the children and she had often effected marvellous cures.

How many toys had they not neatly repaired?—dolls with broken arms and legs, with dejected sawdust bodies, had been here refitted with new limbs, and their emaciated frames renovated; waxen heads, devoid of hair, smirked blandly under new flaxen wigs; decapitated trunks were united to wonderful rag heads, with painted eyebrows; and an agreeable caricature of the lost visage,

faded blooms, were revived with the skill of a Madame Rachel. At the bottom of the largest cupboard there was still an army of sick or wounded dolls waiting for Aunt Mary's skilful surgery.

If Mary's ministrations had not been valued among her adult patients, she would still have been hailed by every little curly-haired Arab "as their favourite friend and toy-mender." Mary's heart had often been touched by the dreary, neglected state of the children. Some had literally nothing to amuse them; one baby had the sole of an old boot which it was making believe to cuddle; another had picked up a broken flowerpot, and was gloating over the fragments with a "Pretty, pretty." Could nothing be done for these poor innocents? Toys were not to be bought where bread was often wanting; but Mary thought of another plan—she organised a raid on the nurseries of her friends; she bore down upon the more respectable inhabitants, and carried off armfuls of broken or disused toys. Then began those wonderful afternoons, which were called the "Hospital Saturdays." Then was the round

table cleared, and the head surgeon and her dressers brought out their limp patients, and operated on them to their hearts' content. What beautiful cases of compound fracture were bound up! the rag heads were rocked by-and-by against the grimy little bosoms. Jemmy Stokes was made happy by a cart that actually moved on wheels; wonderful Noah's arks, with animals such as never had appeared and never would appear on this earth, tumbled out of that memorable refuge.

"Let me paint the zebra, Aunt Mary," May would plead.

"Zebra, my dear!" Aunt Mary answered, pulling up her eye-glasses, and regarding the blue and scarlet stripes critically; "that must be some extinct species belonging to the antediluvian period, before zebras wore tails, and had only three legs."

"Oh, I forgot its tail," returned May in a conscience-stricken voice. How the children revelled in these Hospital Saturdays. Aunt Mary always told them some story as they worked—sometimes she sang to them; now and then the door would open stealthily, and

a man's face would look down on the four flaxen heads.

"I wonder if there were any toys in the cottage at Bethlehem," he heard Hatty say once; but before Mary could answer, Lettice had responded in her dreamy way—

"Not bits of painted wood like this; but of course He used to play with the birds and flowers. Don't you remember that picture, Hatty, with the doves? He is stroking their wings and cuddling them; and they look as contented as though they were in their nests, the pretty white things! and there is the mother and the young St. John looking at Him."

"How sorry He must be for all the dirty little babies in Sloane Court!" struck in Rosie.

"Ah, but He is pleased we are mending toys for them," put in May. The children always spoke of such things in simple, literal fashion; to them the Holy Child was no abstract idea, no vague impersonality; they lived with Him; they thought out their childish thoughts in His presence. To them this toy-mending was one of the corporal works of

mercy; it was as holy in their eyes as the incense and gold of the Magi. He had been a child Himself, and so He understood and loved children, and in this way their childish hands grasped the very skirt of His mantle of mercy.

"Hospital Saturday"! and there was Bee's "rich 'ooman" looking round the room with sad, wistful glances; how bare it looked to-night! and yet a bright fire blazed in the grate, and two candles—unheard of luxury—burned in the china candlestick; the old easy-chair, with its worn cretonne covering, looked inviting and restful. Mary sank into it with a sigh, and Lettice knelt down on the rug.

"Would you like to be alone, Aunt Mary? Shall I go down and leave you?" asked the child timidly; she had never seen her aunt look so tired and grave before.

That roused her. "No, dear, no; am I very stupid, Lettie? We will go down together by-and-by, when father and mother have had their talk. Come closer to me, my pet; have I grown strange to you all at once. Why, what a thin little hand! you have been ill, my

darling, and there was no Aunt Mary to nurse you."

Lettice shook her head.

"I wanted you so badly," she whispered, laying her head against her arm. "You seemed so far away, one could not see you, somehow. I could not bear being such a trouble to poor mamma, she always looked so tired."

"You foolish Lettie! Mothers do not think it a trouble to wait on their children when they are ill," replied Mary, pinching her cheek. How thin and white it was! and she was beginning to stoop, too, like her father.

"Ah, but Rosie was ill too; and then there was father not well, coughing dreadfully, and not able to sleep properly. Mamma used to look so worried when she brought me my food or medicine; she never had time to sit down and talk as you do, and she never smiled or said things that made one feel happy. She was always telling me Rosie was cross, and that father was so bad, and that I must make haste and get well and help her. Once she

came back and found me crying, but I was not well enough to stop when she told me, and then she was vexed with me, and said I was selfish and fretful, and that I added to her burthen; but I could not help it, indeed I could not, Aunt Mary."

"My poor little girl, of course not;" and she sighed as she thought of Janet's sharp tones admonishing the sensitive child. Fretful and selfish! Lettice never had been that in her life. When would Janet understand that beautiful nature?

"If mamma had only kissed me I should have felt better, but she went away without bidding me good-night, just as she does when she is displeased with us. I don't know what I should have done. I was so miserable, and feeling so hot and sick too, only father came up to me."

Mary looked relieved. "Go on, dear," she said encouragingly. "Of course father put everything right?"

"Yes, he was so kind; he seemed to understand, and never scolded me at all; he turned my hot pillow, and moved the light where the

shadow should not dance before my eyes; and he bathed my face, and told me to lie as quiet as I could, and I should soon feel better; and he called me his dear patient little daughter, and said I was a good child, and how much he loved us all; and I don't remember any more. I think I must have fallen asleep, for when I woke, there he was still watching me. I know mamma was very kind to me the next day."

Mary was silent; she knew Janet always repented of these irritable moods, but all the same the words haunted her—"What would Lettice do without her father?" Heaven help those poor children if they were ever to be left solely to the care of a mother so exacting and so peremptory! Already Lettice's sweet obedience and simple faith had been sorely tried.

"What now, my dearest?" for the child's forehead was wrinkled with some perplexity and care.

"Oh, I don't know," throwing her arm affectionately over her aunt's lap; "it is so nice to talk to you again that all sorts of queer

thoughts seem to tumble out of one's head, like the animals in May's Noah's Ark. I think I must have been naughty and foolish to think such things."

"What things, pet?"

"Oh, that mamma did not love me as well as the others; she so often says I tire her when I talk, or that I am awkward and silly. Hatty gets on better than I do, though she is often scolded. Oh, if I were only as pretty as Bee!" and the look of unhappiness deepened on Lettice's face. This would not do at all. Mary sat upright, and her tone became bracing; these morbid fancies must not be encouraged, and she turned away resolutely from the underlying truth.

"Lettice, I am surprised at you—you disappoint me. What was it you promised me?"

"Yes, I know, Aunt Mary, but——"

"Hush! no buts. Is not this being selfish, Lettice? is not this selfishness in its most subtle form, cherishing, watching, dwelling in self? Do you think love measures and deals in quantities? so much to you—so much to

Bee—to Hatty. Can you question love, to whom you owe existence? Oh, Lettice, this is wrong—wrong."

Lettice hung her head, and a tear stole down her thin cheek. "Pet, am I hard on you? Who loves you better than Aunt Mary, even when she scolds you.

"Listen to me, my dear one; this is your fault; you are over-sensitive; you think too much of yourself; an unkind word crushes you; a look chills you. Be more generous; the sun is behind the clouds. If your mother reproves you, it is not that she does not love you. Poor mother!"—she went on pleading for Janet, even against her own conviction—"think how harassed she is! how full of troubles! You are a child, Lettice; you cannot understand the burthens that lie upon her shoulders. If she could smile and look happy, she would; when you were a baby, she used to play with you as she does with Bee."

A strange startled look came into Lettice's eyes.

"Aunt Mary, are you sure? did—did," her

voice trembling with eagerness, "did she ever smile and look at me like that?"

"Yes, of course, Lettice, my child. What have you got in your head against your mother? I was very young then, not much older than you, but I well remember her going to the little cot that stood near her bed, and stand looking down on it with such a smile; and once when I was very impatient, she said, "Hush, Mary, I must have a good look at my baby."

"Mamma looked at me like that!" she said no more, but such a radiance lit up her face. Janet would hardly have known her child at that moment, the plain irregular features were so transformed with that inward light; those few words had put to rest something that had threatened to destroy the girl's peace. Now she could be patient, she could endure, since her mother loved her, and had looked at her like that.

Nothing further was said on the subject; for a little while they sat in silence. Lettice's thoughts were happy ones; Mary's had strayed back to her own troubles, to that dim border-

land where they were henceforth to abide—a region of infinite possibilities but of little hope. By-and-by she roused herself, but with difficulty, and they went down together hand-in-hand.

Meanwhile Maurice had said a word to his wife that caused her a little solicitude—"He thought Mary did not seem quite like herself."

"You must not judge of her to-night," responded Janet hastily; "she is tired from her journey."

"Yes, but you are looking so fresh yourself," he returned. "It is not fatigue I mean; she has a worn anxious look, and she is so very, very grave; I am afraid this money is a source of trouble to her."

"Consider what she has been through," replied Janet evasively, but her heart beat a little faster from nervousness. How she dreaded the keenness of Maurice's eyes! What if he should question her more closely about this money? She knew her husband, his high-souled sense of honour, his hatred of intrigue and double-dealing; with all her faults, her ambi-

tion, and worldliness, she had never lied to him or deceived him—she had been as absolutely true as he.

This was the first time she had ever acted without his guidance; what if he were to discover that she had so intrigued for his sake, that by subtle arguments and tears she had induced Mary to give up all her prospects of happiness for the sake of himself and his children?

What if he had seen her abased in the dust for his sake! Would he not have spurned her from him with something like scorn? Would not his anger be bitter against her that she had so humbled herself and him? Ah, he must never know what crooked paths she had trodden on his behalf; Mary would not betray her, and she must answer him by evasion, as she was doing now.

"Consider all she has been through," she had said to him. "Maurice, you do not know, but Charlotte has told me, the whole history of those terrible days. Mary behaved like a heroine; she thought of every one but herself; she spared herself neither day nor night—is it

a wonder if her nerves be worn? Some day I will tell you about it all, but do not speak to her to-night." But Maurice would give no promise; he thought that it might be as well for him to say one word to his sister.

Janet had sufficient tact not to press the point; she was quite aware that with all her husband's softness of heart he had a tenacity of will that nothing could move; with all his love for her, she had never succeeded in influencing him against his judgment.

Janet's only chance was not to leave them together, but here the Fates were against her. Bee, who was excited by her mother's return, woke crying, and refused to be comforted by Biddy's blandishment. "Tell mammie I want 'omes and 'eavens; go away, you stupid old Biddy; Bee doesn't love you; Bee will have 'eavens and 'omes."

"Oh, my naughty Bee," sighed her mother sorrowfully. But there was no help for it; she must sit down in the rocking-chair, and let Bee cuddle her fat arms about her neck. Lettice, in her little bed in the other room, heard her low-voiced singing, "There's a home

for little children," and turned on her pillow with a smile—she was looking at Bee just as she used to look at her.

And in the room downstairs Maurice was talking to his sister.

"Well, Mary," he said, as the door closed upon his wife, "you and I must have a word together. Tell me, my dear, did you get my letter?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Yes, Maurice, of course I did."

"And was it not a kind letter?"

"Very, very kind."

"I never had an answer to it," he returned quietly; and Mary changed colour and looked down.

"I sent you a message through Janet," she returned in a very low voice; "I tried to write—indeed I did; but somehow the words would not get themselves written; I was too tired, I suppose, and everything was so confusing."

"Poor Aunt Mary!" he answered tenderly. "You have had a terrible time, I hear; you must tell me all about it sometime, when you

are rested, and we have leisure for a good long talk. How I have thought of you through it all! how I have gloried in your means of usefulness! You have behaved like a heroine, Janet tells me; but, Mary, you and I never thought for a moment of the reward."

"No, indeed," very faintly.

"Look at me, dear, a moment. There is something in your face that perplexes me—are you sure that this money is not a source of trouble to you?"

The hands that he was holding turned very cold, and for an instant the sudden revulsion of feeling was almost too much for her, and she feared that she would burst into tears, but the next moment she had rallied.

"I think it is a trouble to me," she answered so truthfully that she deceived even him; "I have never cared for riches, I never wanted them; and at present I only feel burthened by a sense of responsibility. Oh, Maurice, help me; what am I to do with it?"

"Is that all, Mary?"

"Is what all! Do you mean am I glad that I have made up my mind to accept it?"

She had grown reckless now in her bravery, and had met him more than half way. "Oh, I am glad, more glad than ever to-night!" but how her lip quivered as she said it! "It came to me, and of course it was the right thing to keep it—how could I doubt it? Now you will teach me how to spend it, you and the children;" and a feeling of thankfulness swelled up in her heart as she looked at his worn face—thank God she had had strength to do the right thing.

Maurice had no idea that his next words were robbing her of her best comfort—"What have we to do with it? it is your own money," he said a little stiffly, for pride was Maurice's chief fault.

Then she looked at him pitifully.

"Oh, don't say that! don't make me sorry that I have grown rich," she said in her sweetest voice. "Think of all the years I have lived here, and how I have been a daughter as well as a sister to you. Have I ever refused to be beholden to you and Janet, that you should turn round and be proud with me."

That appealed to his generosity and touched him.

"Mary, my dear sister!"

"No, I am not your dear sister if you could say such things to me. Why should you deprive me of my greatest pleasure? are not your children mine? do I not belong to you as much as they? Maurice, I did not think you could be so hard."

"No, no!" he said soothingly. "I am not hard."

"Then take that speech back again. It is not my own money—it is yours, it is Janet's, it is the children's. You shall not separate yourselves from me, and leave me out in the cold alone."

"My darling," he returned, quite conquered by her earnestness, "how you talk! Do you think anything can separate us? you shall not look so unhappy over it. What is it you want me to do?"

"Oh, I will tell you that by-and-by," she said more lightly; and rising from her seat, she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him gratefully. She had conquered—oh, yes, she knew that—conquered by the very force of her goodness and earnestness and truth; by-and-

by she would tell him what to do and he would do it. Maurice loved the right and he would never be proud with her again—no, her brother, for whom she had given up all, would never be proud with her again.

CHAPTER XI.

A SUNDAY IN LIME STREET.

At this moment Mrs. St. John re-entered the room, and the conversation became more general; both brother and sister were content to let the matter rest for the present; neither did the one-absorbing topic of interest revive until the following evening.

Janet, who had been living in a sort of dreamland for the last few days, found it strangely difficult to take up the thread of her home life; she woke the next morning with the old weary feeling that it was Sunday, Maurice's hardest-working day in the seven—when he neither spared himself nor allowed others to spare him; when he gave himself body, soul, and spirit to his people; when the claims of wife and children were as naught compared with them—a day when a sense of

separation and divided sympathy seemed to creep over the wife's oppressed sensibility, as she sat in the great square pew in the old city church, with her children beside her, trying to drag her weary thoughts to the level of a meagre devotion.

"Be ye not unequally yoked together." Why did those words of the apostolic injunction haunt her at times, as her eye wandered over the monumental tablets on the opposite wall? Was it her fault that she could not raise herself to her husband's standard? was it not rather her misfortune that he had hung the millstone of her frailty about his neck? He had married her knowing of these difficulties in her nature, but hoping that mere contact with his earnestness would ennoble her. Could she love him, and yet not tread in his footsteps? How could he know that she would grow to regard his work as her rival—that she was hardening her heart and growing stiff-necked in her secret opposition? Alas! poor Janet—so loving yet so rebellious,—she was no Santa Maura to bid her husband preach from the cross!

And yet Janet thought herself a religious woman; she was strict in her observances; she could talk fluently on doctrinal points, and had a strong but sad leaning towards Calvinism.

Her religion was cold and severe. Maurice once told her half jestingly "that she would have made an excellent Pharisee." She was punctilious in her attendance at the week-day services; she ruled her household rigidly in the matter of Sunday observance—even Bee had her Sunday books and sacred puzzles. Her husband would protest at times against such Puritanical usages, but in such matters Janet would have her way, and he would shake his head at her and yield the point. "Don't be too hard on them," he would say sometimes; "above all, let the children love Sunday;" and in his leisure moments he would gather them round him, and tell them some enchanting story or allegory—stories in which some hidden truth would be so cunningly wrapped and disguised that they digested it unconsciously.

Janet often wondered why her children

were so listless and tiresome over their Sunday lessons; they would stumble over their Catechism and sacred history in a heavy uninterested fashion. "I wish all the kings of Israel had been killed by Herod," Rosie once said in an aggravated whisper to Hatty. "I tie knots in my handkerchief—one for Joash and one for Jehoiakim, but I never can remember which is which; you might as well remember the animals in the ark."

"I cannot think what I have done that I should be punished with such stupid children," Janet said once in an aggrieved voice to Mary.

"Hush! they are not stupid; look at them now," Mary answered, pointing to the group before them—five fair heads all mixed up together; five pairs of blue eyes wide open and intelligent; five earnest, happy faces. "Oh, father, how lovely! but how are we to cast our shadows?" asked Hatty—for he had been repeating to them Adams' wondrous allegory of *The Shadow of the Cross.*

"Stupid Hatty!" cried Bee cuddling her father's boot; "you sha'n't have no shadows;

'Oosie and me shall have them all, and live in the great big garden."

"Maurice, it is time for the children to go to bed," broke in the mother somewhat impatiently. Perhaps she felt a little lonely and out in the cold—all those faces turned from her to their father, all those twining arms about and round him. Maurice looked up quickly, and caught the shade on his wife's face.

"There now, away, my darlings, and kiss your mother!" he said. "It is a long story, and we will finish it next Sunday; and God bless my little Bee!" lifting up the laughing child, and kissing the dimpled arms and neck; and Janet smiled as he put her in her arms.

When Janet came down to breakfast that morning with her grave Sunday face she found Mary in her old place, as usual, cutting thick bread and butter for the children, and pouring out coffee for Maurice.

"I am late; I must have over-slept myself," she said in a dissatisfied voice, as Mary looked up and wished her a bright "good-morning." "Good-morning! when it is driz-

zling and wet," looking out at the courtyard and blank wall with a shiver. "I suppose you will go to church with us, Aunt Mary, and miss the Sunday school this morning?"

"Miss the Sunday school?" returned Mary in a tone of surprise; could Janet really think she would shirk her duties in that fashion? Janet looked still more dissatisfied as Mary turned from the table and tied on her bonnet.

"You have made a miserable breakfast, and have eaten next to nothing," she went on complainingly.

"Never mind, I will make up for it at dinner-time," returned her sister cheerfully "Now, Maurice, if you are ready we will go."

Mary taught her class, and then sat among her children in the gallery; her prayers were said to an accompaniment of hobnailed boots kicking against the floor; ducking heads, and whispered messages interrupted the flow of her devotion; sometimes a marble or an apple would be produced during the first lesson, and Mary and the young pale-faced teacher would have a warm time of it. The hymns, too, were occasionally marred by a

dissentient voice chiming in a different key or tune. Mary once detected a popular street melody that was being whistled by a rosy cheeked urchin.

"That is not the tune, Tommy," remonstrated Mary in a whisper.

"Laws, teacher, ain't it now? and sich a bootiful tune—quite 'eavenly-like—downright stunnin'," returned Tommy in an unabashed voice. It was Tommy who was the Mohawk of the class, and whose marble once rolled over the gallery right on to the verger's bald head.

"I 'it 'im! wasn't that a queer start? Didn't I do it furst-rate, and no mistake?" cried Tommy as he was led in awful custody down the gallery stairs. "My, supposin' I had made an 'ole in his 'ead."

"You will live to be hanged, Master Tommy," returned the pale-faced young teacher, who was slightly irascible—he was an excellent young man, but a little narrow and dogmatic in his views. Tommy thought nothing of the sound cuffs administered outside the hallowed precincts; he had much harder blows than that

every day of his life when his mother failed to sell her watercresses.

"He can't 'it a cove, not him!" Tommy observed contemptuously to a shoeblack who was watching the proceeding; "butter fingers, and no mistake! Why, you should just see the old 'ooman lay to; she stings rather—oh laws!" and Tommy stuck his hands in his ragged pockets, and marched off whistling to enjoy a free fight between a tipsy sailor and his mate.

Poor Mary! she was not allowed much peace that morning. During the sermon most of the younger children fell asleep and dropped off their forms; some were picked up and shaken by the pale-faced teacher; others were propping their heavy heads against Mary. The vicar went droning on, excellent man, with his secondly and thirdly, and his slow summing-up of practical points. Janet sat erect, with her little girls in a row beside her; when the service ended, it may be doubted whether she or Mary was the most tired.

But there was no rest for either of them yet. While Janet and her children plodded

through the kings of Israel, and turned the sweet Sunday hours into a long weariness, Mary and her brother went out again through the wet drizzling streets. Maurice had his baptisms and his catechising and his children's service, and Mary spent her afternoon in a great underground room, in a building that was used for all sorts of miscellaneous purposes. Mr. Denoon and Maurice had organised a workman's club and a young man's institute; there was a lending library and a course of evening lectures; and in the basement storey Janet spent purgatorial hours over her mothers' meetings.

On Sunday afternoons about twenty or thirty boys and youths belonging to the night-school were wont to congregate. This was Mary's special work, and one that yielded her most entire satisfaction; it was singular to see the influence she possessed over these raw lads; there was not one of "our boys," as she called them, who would not have pulled off his old coat and fought a dozen rounds in defence of "teacher." One new recruit had already been soundly thrashed because he was

caught mimicking Mary's way of putting up her eye-glasses. "A low cadgerin' cove, to take off teacher's specs," was the remark, as Mary's champion dealt the last facer that brought his antagonist to the ground.

They were a rough ragged crew, these lads who gathered Sunday after Sunday in the great underground room with its brick floor and wide cheerful fireplace. When the class was over a plain plentiful meal was set out on the long tressels; the pale-faced young teacher, who was a tailor by trade, and a Timothy in name and heart, dropped in to help Mary in her arduous task of cutting great hunches of bread and butter. An old widow who turned a mangle in the next court boiled the water for their tea. At the last moment Maurice would look in to say grace and give a few cheery words to the lads.

Poor fellows! this weekly meal was a new experience in their hard poverty-stricken lives. Some of them were costermongers; two or three had no settled home, and were mere waifs and strays picking up a livelihood down by the river-side; the others lived in the foul

reeking courts and alleys with which the place abounded. To these boys the roominess, the warmth, the good plentiful food, and the beaming face of their teacher gave them their first notion of a home. An eccentric old sugar-baker was the benevolent provider of the weekly feast. "Laws, we do have our tea sweet and 'ot, and no mistake; and as much bread and butter as we can stow away," cried one poor lad, whose usual lodging was an arch-way in the neighbourhood of Farringdon Market. "When one is warm and comfort-able the hymns don't matter so much; one can holler them pretty freely."

To Mary this was a sacrament of love; no hour in the seven days was so sweet to her as when she stood among her "boys," dealing out the food to them with her own hands. As the clock struck six her labours were ended. Sometimes, but not always, she would go to evening service to hear Maurice preach; at other times, when she was tired, or when Janet wanted to be set free, she would go quietly home and spend the evening with the children.

How they loved these evenings with Aunt Mary. The "Sunday populars," as Maurice once called them, were valued almost as highly as the "Hospital Saturdays;" then it was that they sat round the fire in the winter, or at the open window in the summer, and sang their favourite hymns one after another.

Bee would lie with her head on Mary's shoulder, crooning an accompaniment in her baby fashion. When they had finished she would imperiously demand her favourite "mammie's 'omes," as she called it; nothing else satisfied her; it was Bee's lullaby, but she liked it best when her mother sang it. "Mammie, 'oo has a lovely voice," she would say, when Janet had sung through the oft-repeated melody in her low vibrating tones; "'oo shall be a dead angel too one day, and have a great big harp all to yourself."

But to-night Mary was tired, so she went down to the church and sat alone in the great square pew; and the quiet service refreshed and strengthened her, and then she and Maurice walked home silently together.

Janet received them with rather a cloudy

aspect; the day had been a trying one to her, and she felt jarred and out of tune, and there was Maurice coming in with his tired face, and the exhausted, spent look his wife knew so well.

He threw himself down on his easy-chair and put his arms behind his head, a favourite position of his. Janet brought him some wine without speaking, and put back the damp hair from his forehead; she knew nothing soothed him so much. She never found fault with him, however much he tried her; but to Mary she was somewhat given to speak sharply; her first words were in the old dissatisfied tone.

"The children were so disappointed that you went to church, Mary; poor things, they had counted on your spending your first evening at home."

"I am very sorry," replied Mary in her gentle way; but she said no more, she could not well tell Janet that she was in too sore a mood to enjoy the children's innocent voices. The day had been a weary one to her, and she felt tired and overstrained; how could Janet or

any one know of the dull pain that was now her companion night and day.

Maurice raised himself lazily to look at her; a half-amused, half-proud look twinkled in his eyes.

"Think of our heiress sitting in the gallery amongst all the dirty boys and girls of Whitechapel,—a disguised princess among shoeblacks! Did you feel very odd, Aunt Mary?"

"I felt much as usual," she returned calmly. "Oh, by-the-by, Maurice, since you have begun on this subject, I will tell you what has come into my head. Wednesday is your leisure day; Janet and you and I had better go down to Crome."

"Oh, indeed!" observed her brother, closing his eyes in a provoking fashion.

"When a thing has to be done it is no use putting it off," she went on in the same matter-of-fact tone, as though she were repeating a lesson she had learned by heart. "I must see the house and speak to Mrs. Pratt. I suppose you could leave the children for one night, Janet? Lettice and Biddy would look after them. That would give us time to

look all over the place, and we could go down to the Rectory and speak to Mr. Champneys."

That made Maurice open his eyes.

"Why, what do you know about Mr. Champneys?" he asked in unfeigned surprise. Mary and Janet exchanged looks; they had been over this ground before. Janet left off manipulating her husband's hair; her fingers were not quite steady. But nothing could be more unconcerned than Mary's manner.

"Oh, Mr. Champneys is the old rector of Crome, whose wife is in such bad health that they will be obliged to go South for a year or two. Mrs. Reid told me all about them. He wants a curate in charge, Maurice—a hard-working conscientious man—and I am thinking you will just suit."

Mary was looking into the fire, so she missed the flash of Maurice's eyes that answered her; but Janet saw it, and trembled.

"And who told you that I was willing to resign my work here?" he said in a voice that was almost awful to his wife in its strong indignation. For once she forgot her usual tact and threw herself foolishly into the breach.

"Oh, don't speak to her in that way, Maurice," she said, taking Mary's defence upon herself; "you don't know how good she is, and how she is thinking for us all. If you will not spare yourself, if you will go on killing yourself by living in this horrible place, at least be persuaded to leave it for the sake of your children."

Maurice was tired and irritated, and the appeal angered him. "Always the same old story!" and he spoke with a sort of passion in his voice. "Why do you always tempt me, Janet, just when I am weakest? The children—always the children!"

"But are they not your first duty?" she replied, almost weeping, but still holding to her point. Why was Mary so silent? Had she nothing to say?

"No; they are not my first duty!" he almost shouted at her; for he was a man of strong passions, though he generally kept them in check. "Should I have married if I had thought that? if I had believed that my wife and children were to be stumblingblocks and hindrances in my way?"

"Hear him, Mary!" exclaimed his wife bitterly. "He repudiates us; he tells me that I, his wife, and his innocent children are as nothing to him."

But he interrupted her reproaches and silenced her by a look. "No, I do not say that, Janet. Why do you tell me such things and grieve me to the heart? You are wrong—all wrong. My children's welfare is the dearest thing to me on earth. But have I not other children? am I not bound to my people by a tie as holy and as binding as my marriage vows? Why should I divorce myself from them though the one woman that I love bids me do it? Must we do evil that good may come, Janet?"

A storm of conflicting feelings passed over Janet's face: anger at this opposition to her will, despair at his blindness, passionate love for the man whose will overpowered and bore down hers, veneration for the moral strength that remained unshaken by her arguments.

"Mary, speak to him!" she implored. "I can say no more. You hear how he turns

upon me,—how he treats my anxiety for him and the children as an unholy thing that must be trodden under foot. Maurice, you shall not tell me that again, that I tempt you; I will never open my lips if the children be dying one by one round us."

"Janet, my darling——" But she turned away from his offered hand for the first time since their marriage, and left the room.

Maurice looked at his sister with a face of dismay. She had never acted like this before —never. Had he gone too far? Had his sternness broken her heart? Was she not, with all her faults, the truest, the tenderest of wives?

"Go to her," whispered Mary; "no one but you can comfort her. To-morrow, when we are quiet, we will speak of this again."

CHAPTER XII.

JANET'S VICTORY.

"So, Mary, this is what you and Janet have been plotting against my peace?"

The quiet time when they should be alone together had come the very next day. The brother and sister had set out together on one of their interminable rounds, and business had brought them beyond the confines of the parish.

Now in the heart of the city—that great palpitating busy heart—there lies a certain quiet nook, grey with age, and silent with almost antique repose.

One turns into it suddenly, out from the roar and the pressure of the great moving crowds of men and vehicles. The surging mass of human faces ceases. Here there is silence,

a perpetual hush, a few yards of spellbound quiet, where one can speak and yet be heard, where the eye can rest on a narrow strip of sky, on grey old buildings, on the flagged pathway. And here Maurice and his sister had paced up and down for the last half hour. The few passers-by took scanty note of them; perhaps from their bent heads and earnest faces they may have judged them to be lovers. Lovers! what an incongruous idea to a business man in the full light of the day!

Mary had been talking and Maurice had listened. He had said nothing to her of the terrible night he had passed, of Janet's wild weeping when he had gone up on his ministry of comfort, of the long sorrowful talk they had had together—all this had been sacred to Janet's husband.

"Tell me all that oppresses your poor heart," he had said to her; but even as he spoke the current of her words seemed to suddenly freeze up within her. The time had gone by when she could tell him all. Henceforth there must be one subject untouched between them—a secret gnawing of remorse

for a woman's pain that was beginning already to make itself felt.

Ere long there was silence between them; but while Janet slept Maurice lay open-eyed in the darkness thinking over her words. Was he wrong after all? self-willed? stubborn in his notions of what was his duty? Could it be that these two women were right? Was the time come when his Master should call him to work in a less crowded corner of the vineyard? Had he been unfaithful to his charge that he should be banished to feed "those few sheep in the wilderness"?

What if they were right and his strength was failing, absolutely failing? and then, for he was singularly self-forgetful and careless in such things, he took himself in hand, and questioned himself, as though he were his own patient.

His voice had been weaker lately; more than once Mr. Denoon had spoken to him and urged him to spare himself and rest a little; and the churchwarden, who sat in a pew at the back of the church, had remarked that "he thought he was getting hard of hearing, as he

had not heard half of Mr. St. John's sermon!" If he were to lose his voice, would not all his hopes of usefulness be marred?

Then there was his cough; he had not shaken it off as he had last winter; it clung to him, and seemed to undermine his strength. He was aware too, now he came to think of it, that he had hours of lassitude that were very hard to bear; certain feelings of exhaustion and faintness of which he had not spoken to Janet; a sense of weariness in his devotions that were new to him; a growing irritability that not all his efforts could control. And then with a sort of shock he remembered that their mother had died in decline, not exactly consumption, but a slow kind of wasting that had carried her off in the prime of her young womanhood. Did Janet know that? he wondered; was it this that kept her so fretful and anxious? did she fear to lose him?

He would like to live a little longer, he thought, for her and the children's sake. In spite of his hard work, life was very sweet to him, and he had enjoyed it with a fulness of content which only such a nature as his could

know. Like Mary, he had created his own heart sunshine; his own happiness had radiated round him until it had drawn others into its magic circle. No, he did not want to die yet, not unless his Master should call him; he had not worked sufficiently, he had not bound enough sheaves together, he had not gained souls enough; he had done nothing, nothing to earn his rest.

He was in the heat of the battle now—fighting a hand-to-hand conflict against sin and disease and death. He had snatched victims from the grisly enemy; now and then he had rescued some weary soul from being trodden under foot. What if he were to go apart for a little and watch beside the standards. Would such watching be inglorious? And then he almost made up his mind that he would rest a little.

And then while Mary talked in her sensible way, he had listened in silence. "So this is what you and Janet have been plotting against my peace," he said at last, and there was still a trace of bitterness in his voice.

She turned and looked at him with her

quiet smile. With all his passionate love for his wife, his sister's influence was the greater. On most points they thought alike; they had the same interests, the same single-minded aim—to do good, to live for others, to merge all selfishness and self-seeking in their work. This was their notion of life. Maurice's motto was "Love to God and my neighbour." Janet said, "My neighbour means my husband and children; beyond them there is a great world outside of which we need know nothing."

"Well, Mary, and what does that smile mean?"

"We are not plotting against you, Maurice," she answered simply. "We are thinking with you; putting ourselves in your place; trying to feel as we ought to feel, as a clergyman's wife and sister."

"And the result?"

"And the result of all this thinking is contained in two well-known proverbs, 'Prevention is better than cure;' and 'Half a loaf is better than no bread.'"

"Meaning, I suppose, that if I do not leave my work, my work will leave me?"

"Exactly so; we must not over-drive the willing horse. Maurice, you have no idea of the pace you have been going lately. It is my belief that you are so used up that if we took you out of the traces too suddenly, you would collapse utterly. Seriously, you have been working too much; the oil is spent in your lamp; you are drawing on your strength too heavily."

"And you think my next bill of health will be dishonoured?" in a half-joking voice.

"We seem talking in metaphors, but what I mean and what Janet means is this: you have overtaxed your strength; if you do not believe us now, you will soon be convinced by your own feelings. You are no longer fit for an East-End of London parish; you want less work, less responsibility."

"I am to fill a sinecure's place in my prime; I am to go and rust in a country village, and preach to a few clodhoppers!"

"Maurice, Maurice!" for his tone was very bitter. "It is not like you to say such things. Are there no souls in the country? Will you measure your work by quantity? Are

you sure — do not be angry with me for suggesting such a thought to one so good and wise, so immeasurably my superior—are you sure that there is no self-pleasing, no love of excitement in this?"

He stopped in the middle of his walk, and looked her full in the face. "You have me there, Mary; that is what my conscience told me all last night. Who taught you these things? what gave you so deep an insight into human nature?

"We are all miserable sinners," he went on, "the very best of us. Here I am priding myself on my purity of aim—quite sure of the integrity of my motive—and all at once there is an arrow launched between the joints of the armour—'a certain man at a venture;' eh, Mary? and there I am wounded, stricken in conscience, knowing that I love my work and my own will above everything; and humiliated by the very notion of physical weakness."

"It is very hard," she assented, hardly knowing how to answer this outburst.

"Yes, it is hard," he repeated, mistaking her meaning; "but it is right. I see it now;

it shall be done. Mary, shall you mind going home alone? I want to go into the church for a little;" and she understood, and left him.

He came in by-and-by, and went straight into his study. His wife took him some tea, and he thanked her, but did not invite her to linger. Now and then he had these moods, when some care was heavy on him; he would sit with his hand pressed on his forehead, and would neither speak nor hear what was said round him at such times. Janet would move about with a certain awe, watching him with tender, reverential eyes from a distance, but not daring to approach him. "What is it, Mary?" she whispered, as she carried away his empty tea-cup.

Mary shook her head. "You had better wait until he tells you himself; he is thinking over what I said last night, and it all troubles him;" and Janet restrained her curiosity, and took up her work in silence.

It was a dull evening. The children had gone to bed, and the two women sat alone together. Janet had her mending basket

beside her, but Mary made no pretence of working. She sat in a low chair, with Dollie's letter in her lap, and her eyes fixed on the fire. The past and the future seemed mixed up together in the glowing coal pictures, beyond all efforts to disentangle them.

When the door opened, they both started. Maurice came in shading his eyes from the light; then he stood behind his wife's chair, and took up an unfinished garment.

"You are always at work, Martha," he said; for in his playful moods he would tease her by calling her Martha. His tone made his wife's heart beat.

"You would not like me to be idle?" she responded cheerfully. "I am clever at making old clothes look like new. Look at this frock of May's; it was torn almost to shreds, and see how neatly I have mended it."

"Yes, I see," he answered absently. "Don't you wish you had been a mother in Israel, Janet, during the forty years' wandering, when there was nothing old or worn out? Well, wife, put by those things for a moment and listen to me. I have spoken to Mr. Denoon."

"Maurice!"

"Don't interrupt me just for a moment. I met him just after you left me, Mary, and he walked with me a little. I told him that I was afraid that two very wise women belonging to me were right, and that I was not as strong as I ought to be; and then I asked his opinion."

"Well?"

"I was surprised to find that it coincided with yours. It seems that he has been uneasy for a long time,—feared I was overdoing myself, and losing my voice. 'Though it will break my heart to lose you, St. John, and I never expect to replace you, I must own I think your wife is right. Go into the country and vegetate a little; in a few months you will be twice the man you are now.' Those were his very words."

"And you will go to Crome?" asked Janet breathlessly.

"Yes, if Mr. Champneys will have me; it is not such a bad place for a country cure of souls. I shall not be quite buried alive, shall I?—why, my darling, what does this mean?"

as Janet leaned against him, and covered her face with her hands to hide the starting tears.

"Only that I am so glad — so thankful," she whispered. "Mary, thank him for both of us; tell him what a burden—an almost unendurable burden he has lifted off me. Oh, Maurice, how am I ever to tell you how grateful I am to you for this?"

"Nonsense!" he said, bending down to kiss her; but his eyes glistened in sympathy; "what a fuss over a worn-out curate! Take your triumph mildly, Janet, for I am beaten and humiliated enough;" and then he took the seat beside her, and laid his hand on hers. Never had he so much needed the comfort of her presence as he did now that his heart was so sore and downcast within him. "Now you will be happier and more satisfied, will you not, my wife?" he said after a pause; "and you, Mary?"

"Oh, I am so glad," she answered quickly. "Think how lonely I should have been—you and Janet and the children here, and I in that great house miles away."

"And now we shall be all together," observed her sister-in-law joyfully.

"Yes; the Park and the Rectory are not a quarter of a mile—at least so Mrs. Reid told me. You see, Maurice, the will enjoins nine months' residence in the year, so we should have been utterly apart."

"And now we shall be near enough to quarrel every day," he returned, trying to joke. "We shall have to be very careful not to offend the lady up at the great house, Janet. Do you mean to find fault with my sermons, and patronise the poor curate in charge by asking him to dinner on high days and holidays?"

She passed that over with a smile.

"We shall be together just as we are here," she replied simply.

"I shall come down to the schools, and Janet will have her mothers' meeting and blanket and coal club; and we will set on foot a lending library, and winter evening lectures —all the things you have started here; and it shall not be our fault if Crome be not a model village."

Maurice gave her an approving glance, though he sighed furtively; but Janet interposed with a touch of reproof in her voice.

"But, Mary, you must not spend all your time as you do here. The circumstances will be very different; society will have its claims on you; you will have to take up your position in the county."

"I am afraid society will have to do without me, then," she returned quietly; but there was a certain inflection in her tone that warned Janet that she was touching on dangerous ground. Mary, with all her softness, shared her brother's inflexibility of purpose.

"And when do you intend to go into residence, my Lady Bountiful?" asked her brother playfully.

"Not for three weeks or a month;" she answered him quite calmly, as though she had long ago made up her mind. She had thought it all out during those quiet days at the chateau, when she had sat amongst them—not speaking, but weighing all her future life and its responsibilities. "I have so much to do here," she went on, "and you must help me,

Maurice. I want my boys to have a treat; we must take them to the Crystal Palace, you and I, and show them a glimpse of fairy land. Then the ragged schools and the night schools must have a tea and supper; and Janet's mothers, and every child must be made happy. And there must be gifts of clothes and toys——"

"And a general jubilee and rejoicing in Whitechapel," added Maurice; but how proudly and tenderly his eyes rested on Mary! Was not this a sister for whom to thank God? Could any man wish for a dearer and better? Janet caught the look, and a vague discomfort and uneasiness stole over her. It was not that she was jealous of Mary,—strange to say, she never had been jealous of her; but a sense of her own inferiority jarred on her. They seemed to breathe habitually a purer atmosphere than hers—to move in a region where she could not follow them.

She was again behind—left out in the cold; and yet the pressure of her husband's hand lay warm within hers.

"And in a month we are to lose our sister

from under our roof," observed Maurice regretfully.

"Yes, and she will be so lonely without us," added his wife.

"That cannot be helped," returned Mary cheerfully; "busy people are never long dull, and I daresay you will spare Lettice to me. One of the other children might come to me by turns; the country air will do them good, and you will have less to look after, Janet;" and Janet assented gratefully.

"You think of everything and everybody, Aunt Mary," she said; for she was touched by Mary's love for her children; and then a little remorse seized her,—she had robbed Mary of her happiness, and yet here she was already heaping coals of fire on her head.

The next day Mary had an unexpected trial to encounter: Grey Lyndhurst called.

He had hesitated for a day or two—not knowing how far his visit would be welcome to Mr. St. John and his wife. But they were old friends, and he had received many kindnesses at their hand, and he was loth to give them up. The meeting between himself and

Mary would be full of awkwardness,—all the more that there was a strong bond of friendship between them; they had a mutual respect and admiration for each other. Grey always thought of Mary as the dearest girl but one in the world, and Mary had always considered that, after Bertie, Grey was the most superior young man she had ever met. Latterly, the feeling of kindness for him had increased, and she had grown to regard him in a sisterly fashion.

Mary was alone when he called, for Janet was at her mothers' meeting. She was sitting by the fire trying to fix her attention on a book when Grey was announced.

He did not look at her as they shook hands, but he noticed that a moment afterwards she had drawn her chair back into the shadow, so that he could not see her face; and when the fire leapt into a blaze, she took up a little screen and interposed it between her and the flame.

It could not be denied that both were very nervous. Grey talked about their journey; asked after Mrs. St. John, and expressed regret at her absence; made a few commonplace re-

marks on the weather, the state of the roads; and then took up the book Mary was reading. Mary answered him quietly, but her voice was not as clear as usual; a certain mannerism, a turn of the head—something inexplicable and undefinable reminded her of Bertie. She had never before noticed a likeness between the two; a great yearning to ask after him, to hear only his name mentioned, came over her. Would it be wrong? would not the omission of any such inquiry be strange?

Mary was wonderfully simple and child-like in her nature. She had so little self-consciousness that she seldom paused to ask herself how things would look to others. Janet might be shocked perhaps; but then her sense of propriety was always taking alarm.

And so her next words startled Grey, making him drop the book he held in sudden confusion.

"How is your brother?" she asked very quietly; "how is Bertie?" And there was absolutely no faltering in her tone; it was Grey who got red and hot all over.

"Bertie!" he stammered; for he quite lost

his presence of mind. "Oh, he is not very well."

"Not well!" and now the hand that held the screen shook a little. Bertie the strong, the vigorous, not well?

"Oh, as to that it is nothing particular," returned Grey hastily, feeling he had made a slip. "He was out of sorts, slept badly when he was with me, and seemed a little down about things in general. One could not expect otherwise. You must give him time, you know, to get over things a little," went on Grey incoherently, utterly out of his depth and floundering in deeper water still.

Mary ignored the latter part of his speech as though she had not heard it; and yet every word Grey spoke seemed burned into her brain. "Out of sorts, sleeping badly, down about things in general. Oh, Bertie, Bertie!" But she did not show her pain.

"Is he with you still?" she asked quite calmly.

"Oh no," Grey answered; "he left yesterday for Stoneyhurst. Sir Charles telegraphed for him. Ralph is ill again; there is some

talk of their going abroad in the summer—to Davos or the Engadine."

"Oh, that will do him good; it will do Ralph all the good in the world." But Grey was quite aware that she had not meant Ralph.

Then she changed the subject, but not too abruptly, and began speaking of Dollie and her mother, and how she hoped that they would come to her at Crome when the days got longer and the spring flowers were out. And how it happened Grey never knew, but as they talked and the twilight deepened he found himself telling Mary all about it—how he had grown to love her friend, and how inexorable Dollie had been; and a great deal that he had never thought to tell man or woman, but which seemed drawn from him by the sympathetic chord in Mary's voice.

Mary did not hide from him how moved and interested she was by his confidence. She put down her screen and let him see her face now: her eyes were sad, but full of kindness.

"Thank you for telling me this," she said,

when he had finished. "Dear Dollie! how could you help loving her when she is so sweet and innocent? Now you must go on telling me about things, Grey, just as though I were your very own sister." And then her poor lips trembled a moment, for had she not hoped to be his sister? "And when they come to Crome you must come too and do it all over again, and I will help you, and we will all help you. Hush! there is Janet, and we cannot talk any more." And as the young man looked gratefully at her, she held out her kind hand to him in silence, and then moved to welcome her sister.

CHAPTER XIII.

CROME PARK.

It was in the glimmering dusk of a wintry afternoon in December that Mary first saw the house that cost her so dear.

After a slight hesitation Mr. St. John had acceded to her plan. The children were left with many injunctions under Biddy's charge. Both he and his wife looked round many times to catch the last glimpse of the five heads clustered at the window of "father's study." Lettice had been made happy by an extra kiss and a few parting words from her mother. "Remember I trust you, Lettice; be a good child and take care of your sisters for me."

It was still early when they alighted at the little country station. An old-fashioned barouche with a pair of fine bay horses was waiting for them. As Janet threw herself

back on the cushions she looked somewhat disparagingly at the somewhat faded linings.

"You will find things rather out of repair," she said, addressing Mary. "I noticed when I was here before that the carriages wanted doing up. You see it is so long since Mrs. Reid lived at Crome. Some of the furniture is shabby too. You will have plenty of work cut out for you during the first few months."

"I daresay," returned the young heiress listlessly. Janet's remarks were a little trying. What did she care just now if the cushions were faded? She was looking out at the long country road, at the fields and hedges. The hedgerows were black and bare; a keen wind blew in at the open window, making Maurice shiver. His sister did not notice it; her eyes were fixed on the somewhat cloudy sky. A faint mist rose from the fields; the whole landscape looked chill and inhospitable.

"It is very pretty here in summer," observed Maurice, replying to her unspoken thought; but she did not answer him or turn her head. Just then they had come to a little white lodge, very unpretentious-looking, and

not at all ornamental. The gate was opened by a very old woman in a poke bonnet. A broad winding carriage-road led through the Park, which was not large or particularly well-wooded, and where a few sheep were feeding; and then, almost suddenly, as it seemed to Mary, there seemed to rise out of the ground a long and somewhat low red-brick Elizabethan house, with the firelight playing on the antique windows, and through the open door a vista of a large hall with heavy marble columns, which brought back to her mind a vivid remembrance of Mrs. Reid's dream.

That confused her, and for a moment she forgot her *rôle;* but as with her wonted humility she drew back to let Janet precede her, Maurice quietly put his wife aside and held out his hand to Mary.

"Welcome to your new home, my dear," he said, in a voice loud enough for the servants to hear. "Mrs. Pratt, this is your mistress, Miss St. John. My wife I think you know already."

Mrs. Pratt curtsied, and then looked a little critically at the young lady who shook hands

with her so pleasantly. But there was something in Mary's face which, despite of its want of beauty, always prepossessed strangers in her favour—a frankness of look and smile that won them at once.

"Oh, she is not to be compared to Mrs. St. John for handsomeness; she is a real beauty and no mistake, and carries herself like a duchess," observed Mrs. Pratt afterwards to her husband, who had performed the function of butler in the old time, and who, with her niece Rhoda, made up the present establishment. "But I tell you what, Pratt, our young lady is good if she is not bonnie."

"Oh, aunt," interrupted Rhoda, "I think she is good and bonnie too; she has such a sweet smile when she speaks. The other one is handsome, but she is terribly sharp, and looks all round her at once, as though she were given to pick things to pieces before putting them straight"—which speech showed that Mistress Rhoda was tolerably shrewd in her observation.

When Maurice had made his little speech, Mary had shaken hands with the old servants,

and had said a few appropriate words; but though she smiled and looked pleasant, the dream-like feeling was heavy on her. She almost thought she must pinch herself to be sure she was awake.

"It will soon be dark; let Mrs. Pratt show you the principal rooms," observed Janet, thrusting herself forward, for she never liked to linger long in the background. She thought Mary was a little too familiar with the Pratts, and was not carrying herself with sufficient dignity—why, she had actually shaken hands with Rhoda, the rosy-cheeked niece! They formed into a little cavalcade after that, Mrs. Pratt leading, Maurice and his sister following, and Janet and the others bringing up the rear.

Mrs. Pratt made a few concise observations on everything. "The largest room in the county, used as a sort of picture gallery of the Talbot family," she said, as she threw open the door of the great drawing-room hung round with portraits of dead and gone Talbots, from whom Crome had been purchased. The fire-light played on the soft blue damask couches, and on the dark oil paintings. After a cursory

glance at its splendour they went through the dining-room with its large ante-room, and the billiard-room, and the gun-room, and a large bay-windowed apartment that was fitted up like a library, and was called the gentleman's room, and lastly into the morning-room, the pleasantest apartment in the house, with two windows looking out on different views of the park, with easy-chairs and couches covered with old-fashioned chintz, sprawling carnations, and vivid green leaves, a terrible eyesore to Janet, whose taste in such matters was perfect, but to Mary there was something warm and rich in tone, that harmonised with the quaint windows and old tiled fireplace.

But what impressed her most was the strange perspective seen from the house. The windows—some of them mullioned or with small lozenge panes, while others were more modern—reached nearly to the ground, with low broad window-sills; the park stretched to the back of the house—nothing from this side broke the greenness. As one walked up the hall and through the anteroom, one was conscious of a curious effect and trick of perspec-

tive. A hillside seemed to lie outside the windows; the green wave seemed to spread upward; one's feet would climb it presently; but as the window was approached the fancy vanished. There was a pleasant clipped lawn, with pheasants on it; a few palisades divided it from the park proper; there were trees planted well away from the house, hiding the stable and farm building; through a little gate there was a small sunny flower-garden, with an arbour and a long walk and a sun-dial; a peacock and his mate usually strutted along the path, which was known as the "peacock's promenade."

The sun-dial was green and mossy with age, and on it was faintly and almost illegibly traced, "I watch the hand of Time." When Mary paid her first visit the next morning, she found the peacock perched on it, spreading the glories of his tail in the wintry sunshine. The quaintness of the place, its quietness, and the warm tone of the high red-brick wall, with its southern aspect, where peaches ripened, and underneath which blossomed hundreds of roses in summer time—all delighted her.

Later on it became her favourite resort. Here, on summer evenings, she would pace, book in hand, with Topaz and Sapphire strutting behind her; on wet days she would betake herself to the arbour, with her faithful attendants still beside her, and her great black collie at her feet, listening to the patter and trickle of leaves, and watching the thirsty vegetation drinking up and bathing in the warm summer shower, and then hanging out myriads of green fingers to dry in the sunshine.

"We have got ready the mistress's old room for Miss St. John," observed Mrs. Pratt, as they hastily concluded their survey of the lower rooms. Mary felt as though she were to be shut out of the outer world as she entered the apartment allotted to her. A little side staircase led to it; there was a narrow passage, with a small room where all the alarm bells hung; then a large anteroom, bare-looking and almost devoid of furniture, but with a grand view of the park and the lodge; this led to a still larger one, where the great crimson canopied bed seemed almost lost, where the big wardrobe, large enough to conceal a

dozen people, seemed a mere speck against the wall—a vast room so dimly lighted by the blazing fire and half a dozen candles that shadows seemed to lurk everywhere.

Janet lingered behind the others with a trace of anxiety in her face.

"You need not keep this room, Mary; not beyond this one night, I mean. There are others smaller and far pleasanter, though I must own," with a laugh, "they are most of them as big as barracks. This is so lonely, with the great anteroom and belfry,—unless, indeed, you fit up the outer room for your maid."

"I do not mean to have a maid," returned Mary, with an amused twitch of her mouth at the idea, as she took off her hat and warm jacket, and thoughtfully contemplated herself in the long pier glass.

"I don't think Mrs. Pratt was much impressed with her new mistress. I don't look much like an heiress, do I, Janet? You would suit the character far better. Why, what a plump homely sort of body I look beside you!" linking her arm in Mrs. St. John's, and drawing her in front of the glass. But Janet had no

personal vanity, and she scarcely deigned a glance at herself; she only cared for her beauty because Maurice loved it. "You always look very nice, Mary," she returned in a perfectly matter-of-fact way; "heiresses need not be handsome. If you would only be a little more dignified, dear, and hold your own ground with these people. Mrs. Pratt is inclined to be familiar—most old servants are; and you need not have shaken hands with that girl. But by-and-by you will know these things better," checking herself as she remembered Mary must not be snubbed now. "And about this room, there is not the slightest occasion for you to sleep here after this one night, if you take a fancy to one of the others."

"Thank you, but I think it will suit me on the whole," returned Mary a little gravely, for this lecture was not particularly palatable. "It wants a little more furniture, which I daresay we shall find in some of the other rooms. A round table to remind me of my old room in Lime Street—dear old room!"—and she sighed —"and an easy-chair instead of that stiff-looking one, and a couch for lazy times; and I must

do away with that tremendous erection," pointing to the tent-like canopy. "I rather like the size and vast emptiness; it gives one room to breathe; and the anteroom will make a splendid hospital," she continued, quite ignoring her sister-in-law's horrified face.

"Hospital, Mary!"

"Well, workshop, then; the rubbish corner where Jack-of-all-trades and his satellites may be busy to their hearts' content. Now I think of it," went on Mary, rubbing her plump white hands with a mischievous enjoyment, for she dearly loved to plague Janet, and throw word pellets at her as she stood on her moral pedestal environed by proprieties, "now I think of it, we will have our "Hospital Saturdays" here. Dr. Mary and her dressers will still volunteer surgical aid to the sick and wounded dolls of the East End of London;" and then Mary laughed, but her eyes were a little wet, for what had become of the light heart that accompanied the busy fingers? But Janet merely stared at her, too aghast for words. Was it thus that the young mistress of Crome would take her place in the county?

"I think we had better go down to Maurice," she said a little stiffly, feeling that Mary was becoming too much for her; and yet not daring to lecture her too freely in her own house.

The morning-room looked the picture of comfort as they entered it. Preparations for "high tea," a favourite meal in Lime Street, were being duly set forth. Maurice lay back in the depths of an easy chair, gazing at the spluttering pine logs that were diffusing a shower of mimic stars. Pratt, who was placing a dish of cold game on the table, was haranguing him.

"Ay, ay, he was contrairy-like from a boy," he was saying; "a fine lad, a noble lad, but with a spice of devilry in him even then; and the old master was no better," and then Mary knew they were talking of poor Walter.

"Now, Mary, we are all pretty well famished, and I am longing to try that game pie," exclaimed her brother; and then he took her playfully by the shoulders, and inducted her into the seat behind the great silver urn, though Mary hesitated and looked dubiously at Janet.

"No, Mary, it is your home, not mine,"

returned Janet, answering the look; but her voice was a little constrained—perhaps for the first time the thought crossed her mind that an injustice had been done to Maurice—he had been set aside in favour of his younger sister. If things had been rightly ordered, it would have been she, not Mary, who had been mistress of Crome.

The reflection was tormenting, and kept her silent for a while; but there was Mary, pretending to eat, but leaving her plate almost untouched and talking to Maurice as fast as her tongue would go. And she would talk of nothing else but "Hospital Saturdays," and what she and the children would do; and what games of Badminton they could have in the long gallery at the top of the house; and how she would have a little poney for them, that they might ride alone in the park, and a donkey for Bee—a white donkey, with long ears, and a pannier. And would Maurice speak to Jem Anderson, the dog-fancier, for she wanted a collie—a real Scotch collie—to go with her and the children in their walks?

And then, just as Janet was getting inter-

ested, she strayed off to the old subject, and began plying her brother with questions. Did Maurice think it was too far from London to have her boys down for one day?—a long summer day—just to show them what was meant by the country.

"Some of them have never seen a green field or a hedgerow in their lives, poor fellows! and they don't know what cricket is; and their only game is chuck farthing, or playing with an old set of greasy cards. Think of Tommy or Miles Stokes or Bob Scratcher let loose on the grass, and scampering about like shaggy ponies. And then there are the mothers, Maurice—oh, I am always so sorry for the mothers. It is washing and sewing and scolding from morning to night—work doing, and never done—tired, ill-fed bodies and cross tongues, poor souls! Could not something be done for them, Maurice? Could I not have them down, two or three at a time, and fit up one of the attics for them, and let them have two or three days of quiet and good feeding, with lovely sights of green fields and growing flowers to refresh their poor dim

eyes?" And Mary's voice grew tremulous with inward excitement.

"Softly, softly, my Lady Bountiful," returned her brother, smiling, and evidently well pleased; but his wife interrupted him with a few biting words.

"Now, Maurice, how can you heed such nonsense? Mary, I am surprised at you, such visionary stuff, and such want of common sense; really you and my husband ought to live in a sort of fools' paradise of your own. Would you bring down disease and vice and dirt into this lovely place, to infect your house and Maurice's new parishioners. Do you suppose respectable servants would put up with such specimens as Polly Tyler or Mrs. Watkins? it would breed a moral pestilence in the house, even if you escape actual contagion;" and Janet tossed her head in her wrath—never had her prejudices, her sense of what was right and fitting, been so utterly outraged. Mary looked a little crestfallen; both of them turned to Maurice.

"Think of our children—of Mary and her position," exclaimed Janet.

"Think of our poor people, and all our means of doing good," put in Mary sorrowfully.

Maurice looked benevolently at his womenkind, and then he patted his wife's hand as though she were one of his youngest children.

"Don't fret and worry, Janet," was all he said to her; "you may trust me," and then he turned to his sister, and a sort of luminous softness came into his eyes.

"A kind thought, my dear, and spoken just like Aunt Mary; but you remember the words of our favourite old saint, St. Francis de Sales 'make haste slowly'; think as much as you like, but let your thoughts ripen slowly, like the peaches on the south wall—unripe fruit is apt to disagree with one; unripe thoughts lead to incomplete actions."

"Oh, Maurice!" and then she added in a forlorn voice, 'Et tu, Brute!' are you also going to damp me?"

"No, no," he returned earnestly, "I am going to help you by every means in my power; we will work together, Mary, if I ever come here; we will link this parish to my old one, and work for both.

"But dear Janet is right; you must not fill your house with all the ragged mothers in Whitechapel; we cannot interpret things literally, or 'go out now in the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in;' we must spread our feast another way. What do you say, Mary, if funds allow, and you are still in the same mind, to take a little cottage somewhere; furnish it simply, and have some trusty woman in charge—some widow, indeed, like old Mrs. Hales—and then invite your mothers, two at a time, or three, if you like, and let them enjoy a week of country air—would not that plan suit?" as the disappointed look vanished from Mary's face.

"I think it a beautiful plan," she replied gratefully. "Maurice, you are so clever and wise, and can grasp an idea at once. I see I was wrong about bringing them here; of course Mrs. Pratt would not like it."

"I am glad you have come to your right mind," observed Janet curtly. "If you do not mind, Maurice, I think I will go to bed, as I am rather tired from the journey."

Janet might have said more truly that she

was tired with all this talk; her mind was full of plans and ambitious projects; she wanted to talk to Mary about the house and the furniture, and her future establishment; and there was the plate chest and the jewellery to inspect the next day; and she thought they might have gone over the list together; but no, there they were, having one of the old Lime Street discussions, bringing back all the horrid associations that she longed so vainly to shut out of her life—Mary's boys, and the mothers, and old Mrs. Hales, and Maurice gravely promising to unite the two parishes in his thoughts and work.

It would be far better to retire to her luxurious room, and sit by the fire and read, or think. Maurice was quite aware of the reasons that induced his wife to retire. He lighted her candles, and wished her good-night a little gravely.

"I am afraid we have tired her," he said, with a slight compunction, as he sat down opposite to Mary. "Poor dear Janet, how she loathes Whitechapel! I verily believe the feeling is constitutional with her, and that she

cannot help it;" for his tenderness caused him to make large allowance for her.

They sat for an hour or two discussing their plans, and riding their mutual hobbies. As he told his wife afterwards, "It was one of Mary's times of refreshment when she could have her brother to herself, and talk out all her thoughts;" but even Maurice did not know how Mary's sympathy and reciprocity of ideas went far to reconcile him with his wife's deficiencies. Mary could always enter into his plans; he could never weary her. Never were two women so unlike, and yet how dearly he loved them both! He went up presently, and found his wife contentedly reading a novel by the fire.

"How late you are, Maurice!" she said; "but I was too comfortable and tired to stir."

"Poor Janet! how we must have bored you downstairs!" he said remorsefully, as he took up some of her long black hair in his hand and kissed it, as it swept over the back of her chair. "What are you reading, love? *Lorna Doone?* ah! a capital book. I must have another peep into it some day. Now, we will

read the Psalms together, and then you must lay your busy head on the pillow;" and, as usual, Maurice's will was law,—Janet would not have read another page, however much she might have longed for it.

Meanwhile the young mistress of Crome had stolen up the little staircase and past the belfry-room, as it was called, and the empty anteroom, and was standing before the fire, looking down into the flame.

The first night in her own house!

"My house, my servants, never ours—how lonely it makes one feel, just the use of that one little word," she thought. "If it were not for the children I should be far more desolate than I am—bless their dear little hearts! how they will rejoice in this place! I am glad I thought of the poney—that will be beyond their wildest imaginations. And how well Maurice looked this evening! he seemed in such excellent spirits, and hardly coughed at all. Thank God I have had strength given me for the sacrifice. I think I have acted rightly, and if I were only sure that he did not suffer" —but here she broke off, and then knelt

down and said her prayers. She did not trust herself to think; the pain was far too fresh and vivid for that; such thoughts would only unfit her for her daily life; but it always did her good to pray for him. She would plead for her dearest friend, as she called him, with an earnestness she could not use for herself; and when she had finished, she put up her humble thanksgiving that she had been enabled to overcome her own selfishness and to live for others. And then as she thought of her beloved ones who so needed her, and of the great army of Christ's sick and poor who lay outside her own life, holding out feeble hands for succour, a great wave of love and pity swept over the girl's heart. "Inasmuch as ye did it unto them ye did it unto Me," she said; and this was Mary St. John's last waking thought that night.

CHAPTER XIV.

DOWN AT THE RECTORY.

WHEN Maurice came downstairs the next morning Pratt informed him, with a trace of wonder in his voice, that the young mistress was out in the "peacocks' promenade;" "has been out ever so long, all over the place before it was light!" finished the honest butler, secretly marvelling at this strange proceeding on the part of his young lady.

"Why, it is nine now; we early folks think this quite late," returned Mr. St. John; looking admiringly at the green perspective from the dining-room window. "Is breakfast ready, Pratt? I will go and look for her;" and he started off briskly in direction of the garden.

He found Mary standing by the sun-dial, reading the defaced inscription. The whole scene lingered as a sort of lovely sketch in

Maurice's mind ever afterwards — the long walk bathed in crisp wintry sunshine, the red southern wall, Topaz spreading his shining tail to the admiration of his humbler mate Sapphire, Mary looking quaint and homely with her red woollen shawl pinned over her head and arms, the old sun-dial with its massy lichen-covered stones. "'I watch the hand of Time!' what a strange inscription, Maurice," observed Mary thoughtfully, as he stood by her. "Poor old sun-dial, I wonder how long it has been here? how many years of patient still waiting, wetted by rain, frowned on by clouds, blown upon by all the adverse winds of heaven, and only sometime cheered by a tardy sun!"

"A true picture of a faithful life, little moralist!" returned her brother; "an old veteran decayed and worn out, but watching still. If this sun-dial could speak, what strange stories it would tell us of some of those old Talbots! Perhaps some cavalier in Charles's time may have wooed his lady-love just here; or in that arbour yonder some fair creature in hoop and brocade and powdered

hair may have listened condescendingly to her beau in plum-coloured velvet and ruffles, with a Topaz and Sapphire of an earlier generation to strut and flaunt beside them!"

"Yes, one could make up all sorts of romances," observed Mary gravely, for she was not thinking of love stories; other thoughts had come into her head. Would she pace up and down here on summer evenings when she was an old woman, she wondered, a contented tranquil old woman, counting her peaches and gathering rose leaves for her pot-pourri? Perhaps Lettice and Hatty and their lovers would come and whisper by the sun-dial, and she would look at them smilingly; or rather Lettice's and Hatty's children, for she would not be so very old then; and when they had gone, she and the old sun-dial would be alone together! "'I watch the hand of time;' I could say that too," she thought.

"Janet will be wondering what has become of us," observed Maurice, surprised at her unusual gravity; and Mary drew her little shawl closer round her face, and accompanied him to the house.

They found Janet standing at the open window, looking as fresh and bright as the morning itself. She had some white asters pinned in her dress; she held out some to Mary.

"Think of waking up every morning in this sweet place!" she said, drawing a deep breath of intense pleasure. "It does not feel like December at all; there is only just wind enough to ripple the grass. Does it not look like a green sea, Maurice, flowing round the house? I have been into every room, Mary, and some of the furniture is lovely; such carved oak, and some Indian cabinets! very little will be needed to make it perfect."

"You must give me the benefit of your taste by-and-by," returned Mary gently; for she loved to see Janet happy, and would not have damped her for anything. As for Maurice, he looked at his wife with delight—her eyes were as clear and limpid as a child's, the fretful chord had gone from her voice; if she were happy, it would be well for all of them, he thought; and he began to contemplate the change with a less degree of pain.

After breakfast they walked down to the Rectory. It was about a quarter of a mile from the lodge gates; the churchyard and the garden were separated only by a privet hedge; the church was built of grey stone, and had the venerable appearance of extreme age; a mantle of ivy clothed it picturesquely. Maurice was delighted with its outward aspect, but he warned Mary that the inside was less satisfactory.

"It is sadly out of repair," he said; "some of the woodwork is decaying, and the seats in the south aisle are worm-eaten." And when Mary inspected it afterwards under the Rector's supervision, she owned that he was right.

There was a forlorn, neglected air about the whole building. There was some fine oak carving in the choir stalls, and one or two beautiful painted windows; but the font was broken, the high pews looked dilapidated, and the rusty velvet cushions on the altar made Maurice and his sister exchange horrified looks.

The churchyard was pretty, but choked with weeds; in the sunniest corner was the

great red granite monument under which lay Isabel, the relict of Marmaduke Reid, with her husband, and their son, Walter Henderson. It was a large unornamented slab, but a beautiful Spanish chestnut stood near it, and the turf was smooth and cleanly trimmed. Mary thought it a charming nook; she planned with Maurice how they would have a border of flower-beds, with rhododendrons and flowering shrubs, and a seat under the chestnut tree, where they could come and sit sometimes, and where Maurice could compose his sermons in summer time.

"They will be veritably 'meditations among the tombs,'" he said playfully.

They had been received very kindly by Mr. Champneys and his wife. Maurice and he had met before, and letters had already passed between them. While the two clergymen were closeted in the Rector's study, Mrs. Champneys took the ladies over the house, or sat chatting with them in her pleasant bow-windowed drawing-room.

The Rectory was a picturesque gabled house; the red-brick walls were almost hidden in ivy

that climbed to the very chimneys; a wisteria hung over the porch; there was a slightly-sloping lawn, with a mulberry tree in the centre, and a few flowerbeds. An extensive kitchen-garden, planted with a row of apple and plum trees, was shut off from the flower-garden by another privet hedge.

The Rectory was large, but in a frightful state of dilapidation; the upper floor was unfurnished, and in many of the rooms the paper was hanging from the bare walls, revealing the lath and plaster. Janet shook her head over it, but Mary gave her a reassuring glance and whispered, "You can all come to me while this is being made fit for the children," she said; and her sister-in-law felt consoled.

"We have no children with us now, and the house is far too large for us," observed Mrs. Champneys, wrapping her shawl more closely round her, and coughing somewhat feebly as they descended the broad old staircase. She was a thin, dark-eyed woman, with a very soft voice and manner. Life had passed somewhat sadly and monotonously

with her; for years her world had been bounded to her husband's study, to the quaint bow-windowed drawing-room, with its old-fashioned furniture and Indian screens, and great blue jars of faintly-smelling pot-pourri. The upstairs room was full of appliances for an invalid's comfort, and there was a side window in it with a view of the church and the Spanish chestnut, and just a pinky gleam between the leaves in summer time of the granite monument.

At present the trees were bare, and the slab was conspicuous enough. Janet started when she saw it. "I am sorry this window looks out upon the churchyard," she said, "as otherwise it would be my favourite window."

"It has always been mine," returned Mrs. Champneys mildly. "Ah, you are young, my dear, and like a bright prospect!" looking at Janet's beautiful face with visible interest. "In spring when the leaves are out you will see nothing but the church and the trees. I have sat at that window on Sunday morning listening to the singing—I used to tell my husband I had been to church too."

Both Janet and Mary conceived a liking for gentle Mrs. Champneys; but they were less favourably impressed with the Rector. He was a grave old man, with a dry, abrupt manner; very scholarly and precise, but terribly unpractical when they came to deal with him.

He had spent his life in a hermit book-worm sort of fashion, not going much among his people, but poring chiefly over old folios in his study. With a sufficient income he had yet contrived to involve his money accounts; from sheer shortsightedness and want of interest he had suffered the Rectory to fall into a state of shameful dilapidation—dangerous in so old a house: with the exceptions of the rooms he and his wife occupied, there was hardly a sound floor or roof in the place. Maurice whistled in a low voice to himself as he contemplated the room in which his little girls were to sleep.

"Mr. Champneys wants me to take charge at the beginning of February, and he and his wife will not move out until the very last moment; even if Mr. Denoon consent to part

with me then, how are we to make that floor habitable for the children? But Mary only laughed at his dismayed face. "You must all come to me," she said; "Janet and I have already settled that. There is so much to be done that you may be thankful if you get in by June;" and after that they all went down to look at the church.

Mr. Champneys and his future curate in charge found so much to discuss that the two women grew weary of pacing up and down the aisles; and Mary at last proposed that they should walk slowly down the road, and that Maurice should follow them.

"Do you think you will like your future home, Janet?" she asked, as they stood for a moment looking at the ivy-covered gables of the Rectory. To her surprise, Janet's eyes filled up with tears.

"Oh, Mary," she said, "it seems almost too good to be true. Think of waking up morning after morning in that dear old room, with the sun shining on the ivy; and to open one's window and feel the sweet country air blowing over one's face; and the children wetting their

feet in the dews; and Maurice——" but here Janet stopped as though her feelings were too much for her; but she said presently in a low voice, "and we shall owe it all to you."

Mary looked at her with one of her old sunny smiles—they had become rare now.

"You and I will have plenty of work putting the old place in order," she said. "I want you to sell your shabby old furniture, except a few things that we all value, and we will fit up the children's rooms with pretty new bedsteads, and little toilet tables draped with white and pink, and some prints on the wall, and a little cabinet for their treasures; and there must be new carpets in the drawing-room and dining-room; and the curtains in the study were faded. I mean to make it the beau ideal of a country rectory," finished Mary with an enthusiasm that contrasted strangely with her indifference about Crome Park.

"But, Mary, this will cost you too much," returned her sister doubtfully.

"What does it matter what it costs," retorted Mary with sublime generosity. She would not have moved a finger to purchase a

new cretonne for her morning-room, or to replace the faded lining of her carriage, but Maurice's and Janet's home should be as perfect as she knew how to make it. True, the furniture would be the Champneys', not theirs, but the rooms should be brightened by new carpets and hangings, and the upper floor should be converted into a sort of child's paradise; she and the mother would have their own way there.

"Oh, but, Mary, think when they come back, and we have grown to love it, and to look upon it as our home; will it not be too hard to turn out?" For it was part of Janet's unhappy nature that she could not abide in present happiness, but must be ever straining her mental vision after possible shadows.

"Nonsense!" returned Mary stoutly, for she had scant sympathy with the want of faith which, as she always truly observed, lay at the bottom of such doubts. "Perhaps they will never come back. Mr. Champneys is not so very old; but he seems to me inclined to shirk his work. If Maurice suit him he may keep away for years; and what is the use of looking

forward? and who can tell what may happen?" Mary spoke thus hastily, but she little knew the changes that the years would bring.

Perhaps Janet felt her words deserved rebuke, for she took the lecture very quietly, and Mary went on with their previous discussion.

"As to expense, you need not trouble your head about that," she said; "for since I have talked to Mr. Senhurst, I have been quite bewildered with the amount of money I have to spend. I had no idea Mrs. Reid was so rich. I must talk to him again, and get him to give me a little advice, for Maurice seems so helpless about money matters; you and I must arrange things by ourselves, Janet. Maurice evidently thinks that the Rectory being rent free he will be able to live comfortably on his curacy; and," with a little amused laugh at her own duplicity, "I do not see that we need undeceive him."

"How do you mean?" asked Janet, rather bewildered by Mary's manner.

"Well, I will have another business talk with Mr. Senhurst, and get the reins more firmly in my hands, and then I will inform you

more decidedly of my plans. I want to put aside a certain sum for Maurice's benefit, that could be paid to you in monthly instalments for the use of the house. You have always managed all the accounts, Janet; and I do not see that we need trouble him."

"Oh, Mary!" but Janet could not utter another word, but in her secret heart she thought "She is heaping on me coals of fire."

Mary misunderstood her emotion.

"Oh, you poor thing!" she exclaimed, "how you must have suffered from the strain of all these years. You took all this burden on yourself to spare Maurice; no wonder you so often looked fagged and tired out.

"You shall not have another day of anxiety if I can help it," she went on in a pitying voice. "You shall bring me all your bills, and we will pay them together; and I will be your banker, and you shall draw on me. Seriously, Janet, what a pity it seems that the will has hampered me with the care of this great house!" for they were now crossing the park; "it seems to me such a waste of money keeping it up just for one stupid young woman; and all

the time I would rather live in a little cottage about the size of the lodge, and keep chickens and bees, and plant my own cabbages."

"Oh, Mary!" sighed Janet, "you don't seem to me to care for one of the good things that have come to you;" and a cloud came over her face.

"Oh yes, I do care," she returned very quickly. "I care very much to see you happy, and to hear Maurice laugh as he has done this morning. Ah, there he is!" as they heard the long strides behind them; and Janet stood still and waited for him with such a smile on her face.

The remainder of the day passed less pleasantly to Mary. After luncheon Janet had her way, and they inspected the store-room and the plate-chest; and sundry cases of jewels were brought out of the strong box and displayed to Mary's wondering eyes.

"Are these all mine? Can I not give them away?" she asked; and as Janet replied, "Certainly not," in her old dictatorial tones, she persisted. "But I can lend them to you; you can wear them, you know."

"My dear Mary, a clergyman's wife!" for

Janet was very orthodox in her views, and would not have done anything unbecoming her station for the world. She had given all these things up when she had married the poor curate.

"And you used to be so fond of diamonds. I remember you told me so once," observed her husband regretfully, as he laid a sparkling aigrette against her dark hair; but Janet put up her hand gently and removed it.

"I do not want ornaments for myself," she said; "I shall enjoy seeing them on Mary." Mary held her peace like a wise woman, and did not tell her that she never meant to wear such things. What would be the use? It would only provoke an argument. She put away the glittering gems in their cases; probably she would take them out again to show Dollie, who loved such things. When Maurice, in almost boyish fashion, wanted to fasten a ruby serpent round her wrist, she drew back almost impatiently. "Don't, Maurice, we have no time for such nonsense," she said quite sharply. When Mrs. Pratt came in to carry away the cases she left the room, and stole softly down the darkening hall. Maurice

found her a long time afterwards standing beside the open door, looking out on the grey dusk. "Mary, it is so chilly, you will catch cold," he said. "The carriage is coming round directly, and Janet has gone upstairs to get ready;" but Mary hardly answered, and for some minutes she did not move.

"Yes, the sacrifice was made willingly—willingly; but they should not deck the victim;" those were her thoughts. When Bertie should hear of her, no one should be able to tell him that the young mistress of Crome wore grand attire and adorned herself with jewels. She would be as simple and unobtrusive in her personal dress and habits as though she were still living in Lime Street. If Janet found fault with her plainness, she would turn off the subject with a laugh. No one should influence her in this matter, not even Dollie. For his sake she might have learned to care for dress; but now the opinion of the outer world was as nothing to her.

"They want to bribe and coax me into forgetting you, Bertie," she said to herself, and she laid her head against the cold marble pillar

and cried a little; and then she dried her eyes and made her resolve, and that comforted her.

"What does it matter if Janet does tease me a little?" she thought. "I can have my own way in spite of her; and one day, perhaps, she will understand;" and then she went upstairs.

"Good-bye, you dear beautiful place, until I see you again," cried Janet enthusiastically, as they drove rapidly away from the hall-door. The park looked barren and chill; but through the open door there was a vista of brightness. But Mary leant back in her place and did not answer; only one month of freedom, she thought, and then the red walls of Crome would close round her—like a prison—for evermore.

CHAPTER XV.

FOOTSTEPS IN THE SNOW.

THE next month passed over only too quickly as such last months will. Mary, on looking back to it, secretly marvelled at the rapidity with which it passed, and at the daily strength given to her.

"My meal wastes not, and my cruse of oil does not fail," she wrote once to Dollie, in answer to some words of sympathy expressed by the other; but this quaintly-phrased assertion was all she ever said on the subject. And yet whole pages of self-pity would not have been more eloquent, for it spoke of a daily want and a daily famine replenished from a supernatural fount, of a strength not her own, in which she lived and worked.

It is a true saying that busy people are seldom long unhappy people; that nothing so

exorcises the demon of inward disquiet as work rightly undertaken, and carried on without flagging. There would have been no room for the seven other spirits in the swept and garnished apartment of the parable if it had not been empty. And Satan's work is done by desolated hearts as well as by idle hands.

In speaking of this time in her life afterwards, and always frankly acknowledging it as a time of trial, Mary once said: "I was always so busy that I had never time to think, until I was alone in my own room at night, and then I was often so tired that I could do nothing but sleep; now and then I had hard times, but I was helped through them;" and ever afterwards her favourite "preach" as she called it, to people in trouble used to be—"Never mind what you feel or how you feel; leave all that alone; only do something—never be idle a moment." So, during these last days that she spent under her brother's roof, Maurice's keen eyes discovered nothing amiss, and even Janet, who watched her narrowly, wondered and rejoiced as she heard Aunt Mary laughing in her old fashion with the

children, or listened to her light footstep running up and down the stairs. True, the laugh soon ceased, and there was often a sigh after the smile, and sometimes a tired wistful look came into the brown eyes. But if responsibility were making Mary graver, who could blame her?

Mary was having her own way, and Whitechapel was holding high day and holiday that Christmas. The expedition to the Crystal Palace had been organised and triumphantly carried out, at the cost of ten hours of intense fatigue to her and Maurice. Janet's mothers had been bidden to a feast, such as their imagination had never conjured up, and gifts of clothes and money had been transferred to the toil-worn hands, as Mary and Janet wished them good-night; on Twelfth-night a gigantic Christmas tree and cake, with a magic lantern, and refreshments of buns and oranges to follow, had allured all the children of the ragged school and Sunday school, to the great delight of Lettice and Hatty and Rosie, who were allowed to help in the distribution.

"Oh, mammy, look at the dolls burning,"

whined one little white-faced mite, clinging to her mother's ragged gown. Poor little gutter child! she evidently believed that she was invited to be present at a mighty auto-da-fé; and another little fellow of tender years called it a great burning bush, with a lively remembrance of Teacher's lesson last Sunday.

"Ain't it 'eavenly?" observed Mary's favourite plague, Tommy Stokes, in an aside to another curly-haired Arab. "Wot lots of candles and goodies! I call that stunnin' of Teacher, that's wot I call it."

Tommy's opinion proved general, and during the last week of her stay in Lime Street, Mary tasted the mixed delight of excessive popularity. When she moved abroad a password seemed to spread through the courts, and a ragged train, grinning from ear to ear, escorted her to her destination. This was embarrassing. On one occasion an impromptu serenade was got up by her boys, "her special and particulars," as Maurice styled them.

The intention was good, but the performance was sadly marred by a deficiency of suitable and sound instruments. The band on

inspection was found to consist of a banjo, very much the worse for wear; a wandering hurdy-gurdy that had been pressed into the service; a broken-winded accordion; and two or three Jews' harps. In consequence of these defective arrangements the concert had been chiefly vocal, and had been restricted to two of the best-known melodies, "Rule Britannia" and "God save the Queen."

"Teacher won't know we means it for her," objected one lad, Phil Harmon, who was a "coster" by trade and tolerably acute for his years. This was a general poser, and felt to be such even by the hurdy-gurdy, who was of foreign extraction, and carried white mice in his waistcoat pocket.

"I say, you chaps, I've got an idea," announced Phil after a long silence, during which there had been much pulling of grimy locks and dejected whistling; only it must be added that Phil prefixed his observation with a strong expletive or two, language not being particularly choice in Whitechapel. "Couldn't we alter a word just here and there, that might tell her wot we are up to?"

"In course; you're a sharp 'un, Phil. What a soft lot we are not to think of that!" returned his chum, Dick Sawers. "Go it, old chap; tune up," to the hurdy-gurdy, who showed his white teeth as he ground at his melancholy instrument.

So Mary, wondering at this unusual burst of loyalty from her boys, was much amused and edified by Phil's transposition—

"Send her victorious,
'Appy and glorious,
Long to reign over us,
Teacher, we mean."

"Pitch it high, sing it loud, you fellars, and keep it up," shouted Phil; "laws, isn't it fustrate? there's no mistaking that—'Teacher, we mean.'"

"Thank you, Phil, thank you all, boys," said Mary, trying to stifle her amusement with becoming gravity. The drollery was too much for Maurice, and he was obliged to retire hastily. It was Janet who seemed most touched by the proceedings, and who cut the home-made cake with lavish hand, and distributed the slices with mugs of hot elder wine; but Janet could afford to be hospitable now. The boys looked askance, and held back like sheep

in a pen as that graceful vision appeared on the threshold; it was Teacher they wanted. When Mary came out a few minutes afterwards, their faces cleared, and they ceased elbowing each other in their shyness; it was only the hurdy-gurdy who held out his white mice to Janet with an engaging smile, and "Grazia Signorina bella;" the rest of the lads had clustered round Mary with eager looks.

"Wasn't it fine and clever of Phil, Teacher? Now you knows wot we means—'appy and glorious, and all that sort of thing."

"Yes, yes," interposed Mary hastily, for the corners of her mouth would go; "it is very kind of you, boys; now eat your cake and drink the wine, for it is beginning to snow."

Besides this mutual interchange of civilities, Mary was busy in other ways. There were long business consultations with the lawyer, Mr. Senhurst, and not a few more, purely domestic in character, with Janet; sometimes these talks lengthened into arguments, in which Mary, though tired, always came off victor. Janet was beginning to see that Mary would set about things in her own way.

But on the whole, Janet was tolerably contented, and unusually affectionate; during the last few days she seemed hardly to like Mary being out of her sight. Sometimes when Mary was engrossed with her work and writing, she would sit looking at her until her eyes filled with tears. Mary did not notice it, but Maurice did, and he was not a little touched by this new gentleness and solicitude on his wife's part. "If Mary were her own sister she could not be fonder of her," he thought; but it was not only affection on Janet's part.

"Dear Mary, I cannot bear to think that you are leaving us to-morrow," she said the night before her departure. She was standing by the fire in Mary's room; Lettice and her aunt were packing some old books away in the cupboard; Mary was on her knees working busily. "The only comforting thought is that you will soon have finished all this drudgery, and will have time to rest."

"Time to rest!" ejaculated Mary with a horrified face. "Oh, Janet! wish me anything but that; we mean to be busy—Lettice, do we not?" for Lettice was to accompany her to

Crome—a clear month of heart contentment and satisfaction to the careworn but childish Lettice.

She smiled a silent assent to Mary's question, and then went on piling up the books. To work with Aunt Mary was better than to play with other people; to spend a whole month alone with her in her beautiful new home was almost too much happiness. Was she not to sleep in the room next her aunt? and Boy, the new black collie that Maurice had procured for his sister, was to sleep in the little bell-room outside. What long walks they were to take together! what quiet cosy evenings they were to spend alone, with only Boy to keep them company! Lettice's nights had been almost sleepless with the anticipation of this wonderful visit.

"I wish you would leave all that for me to finish," continued Janet, watching them with discontented looks; for she wanted Mary to come and sit by the fire and talk comfortably. But she might as well have spoken to the wind. Mary only looked up at her with a good-natured laugh, and went on packing her books.

"Don't wait, Janet, if you are tired," she said; "I am as fresh as possible, and could go on working until midnight. Lettie, darling, it is time for all good little girls to be in their beds; run away, dearie, I can do the rest by myself."

"Oh no! let me help you," returned her sister-in-law with alacrity. This was what she wanted, to get rid of Lettice and have Mary to herself. And yet there was nothing for her to say that the whole household might not hear. Lettice rose reluctantly, but she was far too obedient and well-trained to hesitate. Janet kissed her affectionately.

"What am I to do without you for a whole month, Lettice?" she said, putting her hands on the child's shoulders, and looking at her with a sort of proud tenderness; for Janet was secretly proud of Lettice's cleverness. "What a cruel Aunt Mary to rob me of my eldest daughter!"

"Hatty has promised to be very good and help you, mamma," returned Lettice with her usual shy diffidence. She was always a little shy and awkward with her mother; but how

her heart beat with joy and excitement at the thought that her mother would really miss her!

"Oh yes, Hatty will do very well, but all the same I never want to get rid of any of my children," replied Janet, patting her gently, and then motioning her to the door. "Don't get talking to the others, Lettice; go to sleep as fast as you can." And Lettice said, "Yes, mamma, I will try," and went off and lay contentedly awake through the next two or three hours, wondering when the night would pass, and the wonderful day begin.

"Do you know, I think Lettice is certainly improved," was Janet's next observation. "I am not sure that she will be so very plain when she grows up, after all; she has nice eyes, and when her face lights up and looks intelligent, there is something quite attractive about her."

"I always thought so," was Mary's quick reply, for this qualified praise did not suit her. "She is far above the average of girls in my opinion; of all the children, Lettice takes most after her father."

"Well, yes, perhaps so," in a softened tone, for Janet did not like parting with her child.

"She is a darling, and will make the dearest little companion," continued Mary enthusiastically. "It is so good of you and Maurice to spare her to me for so long!"

"Good, Mary?"

"Yes, indeed; and I am very grateful to you both."

"Please, don't say so," returned her sister hastily, "as though I don't owe you all—everything. Oh, Mary," and then she came behind her and took hold of her, "do tell me that you are contented about things, and that you are not so very unhappy."

The books dropped from Mary's hands; then she picked them up again steadily, and put them in their places; but Janet still stood behind her, holding her by the shoulders.

"Oh, Mary, if you could say just a word to ease me!"

Then the answer came, but Mary did not turn her face.

"I am quite content about things, and I am not so very unhappy," she said; and her

voice was low, and quite steady. If her lip trembled as she said the words, and if there were sudden tears in her eyes, Janet was no wiser.

"Look, that is all quite tidy," she said, rising from her knees, and speaking in her usual voice; "how dusty I have made myself! Now I have only my clothes to pack, and then I shall have finished."

"Let me help you," replied Janet, brushing something suspicious from her cheeks, and turning to the window under pretence of looking out on the night. "Why, it is snowing,' she continued after a pause. "Oh, Mary, it will be so cold at Crome! and you would not be persuaded into buying a sealskin."

"Thirty guineas for a winter mantle, and my own is quite good! No, indeed," was the uncompromising answer; for this had already formed the basis of a stout argument; but as usual, Janet recapitulated the various heads in her next sentence.

"But, Mary, how absurd! how can you be so obstinate when I have already told you over and over again that your jacket is badly cut

and quite old-fashioned? You remember you got it a bargain at the summer sale at Vendale and East's. Thirty guineas is not too much for you to give under your present circumstances; besides, it will last eight or nine years as good as new. There is nothing like a sealskin for beauty and comfort and durability."

"Very well," replied Mary, who had heard all this before; "then we will get you one next winter, Janet. Maurice shall help me to choose it."

"Nothing will induce me to wear it," returned Janet with spirit. "Oh, Mary, how can you be so incorrigible?" but she said no more, and the packing proceeded smoothly. It was Maurice who interrupted them at last, and scolded them both for keeping each other up; but as his lecture lasted for half an hour, during which he persisted in sitting on Mary's box, and haranguing the tired women on all sorts of foreign subjects, it may be doubted whether his interference was quite beneficial. Mary got rid of both of them at last, and sat down on the rug for a good hour staring into

the fire, while Lettice lay in the adjoining room gazing open-eyed into the darkness, and thinking it a dozen nights rolled in one, and longing for sleep to come and bridge over the weary hours of waiting.

Mary had made up her mind that she would not arrive at Crome before dark; there had been a battle royal on the subject with Janet, but she had adhered to her resolution.

"Fancy flitting into your new home like a bat," observed Mrs. St. John, with a favourite toss of her head, "instead of driving up in state!"

"I should like to walk in, only Lettice and I would lose ourselves and wet our feet," returned Mary quietly.

Mary had worked so hard the previous night that there was nothing for her to do, and only a prospect of a long morning with Janet and the children. Plenty of snow had fallen, and the grey cloudy sky contained promise of more. It was raw, chill, and uninviting; nevertheless, Mary put on her thick boots and her waterproof and went out with Maurice. Neither of them appeared until

dinner time, when they came in powdered with snow and looking cold and tired.

"What a bad day for Mary's journey," observed Maurice, warming his numb hands at the fire; "nothing will induce her to put it off, I suppose?"

"It is not a long journey, and she has already been out needlessly," returned his wife drily; and Mary understood at once that she was considered to have sinned in so absenting herself; but she only laughed and observed cheerily, "That's right, Janet; what a sensible woman you are!" and shook out her wet jacket.

At last the hour for their departure came. Maurice went with them to the station. Mary was very silent at the last, and let Janet and the children cling about her as they would; even to Maurice she said but little.

"I hope you will not be dull, Mary, alone in that big house," he said rather anxiously, as he stood leaning against the window of the train.

"Oh no, I shall not be dull with Lettice and Boy," she returned, stooping down to

caress the dog; and then as he bade God bless them both, she raised her head and smiled at him; and Maurice wondered afterwards that her smile had seemed so sad!

During the journey she did not speak much to the child, but sat looking at the falling snow. Just before they got out of the train it ceased, however, and the drive down the smooth white roads was delightful to Lettice; but the intense whiteness of the surrounding country and the light, neither clear nor dark, produced the same dream-like feeling in Mary that she had experienced on her first visit—a sensation that she was somebody else, and that she was not living out her own life, that presently she would wake up and be her old happy self again.

But to-night the feeling of unreality was stronger and still more curious. In vain she reasoned with herself as they drove through the park; in vain she told herself that this was her home, where she and she alone was to live out her life, for others not for herself; that she would only leave it to be buried under the Spanish chestnuts in Crome church-

yard. The idea all at once became incongruous and impossible. She gave it up at last, and listened to Lettice's awe-struck raptures. Then came the welcoming lights and the open doors of Crome, and the Pratts' kindly attentions.

"Dear Aunt Mary, are you not glad to be in your new beautiful home?" exclaimed Lettice, when at last they were left alone. Rhoda, the rosy-cheeked housemaid, had escorted them to their rooms, and had assisted at Lettice's modest toilet; and the snug meal in the morning-room had been somewhat marred by Pratt's officiousness, as he disregarded his young mistress's hints, and persisted in handing round the dishes: but at last they were alone, and Lettice was in her favourite seat at her aunt's feet.

"Do you like my house?" returned Aunt Mary with a smile. "Are you sure it does not disappoint you? that it is big enough and grand enough even for Hatty?"

"I think it is fit for the Queen," was the earnest answer; "but nothing is too good for you, Aunt Mary. Oh, how lovely to think we shall be alone together in this beautiful place

for a whole month! and that to-morrow I shall see the peacocks and the pheasants and the park!" and again Mary smiled. The childish talk pleased and soothed her; she even felt regret when Rhoda came with the silver candlestick to escort Lettice to her room. For a moment she felt as though she must keep her with her this first night, as though she could not be left alone. But Lettice's eyes were bright and feverish with excitement, and her cheeks were pale, so her aunt's unselfishness prevailed. What did it matter if she were lonely this first night? would she not often have to spend solitary evenings with nothing but her own thoughts to keep her company? And yet when the door closed upon Lettice and her attendant, and she could hear their retreating footsteps across the hall, she could have called them back; but she refrained, though tears of unutterable loneliness and longing rushed to her eyes. Such loneliness, such longing, such an indescribable craving for the touch of a hand and the sight of a face that was dearer to her than all the world beside!

But now a strange thing happened to her, and one that would seem incredible to most good folk, who deem women but fools sometimes with their fads and fancies, not dreaming that their philosophy may be at fault sometimes, and that there may be marginal possibilities beyond their average conjectures.

For as Mary sat alone that night in her beautiful new home, sick at heart and trying vainly to keep back the unbidden tears, thinking of Bertie, and wondering where he was and when she should hear of him again, a sudden feeling of nearness and warmth and comfort came over her.

And how it came she knew not, and what it meant she hardly cared to ask—women are such strange credulous creatures, and so given to all manner of fond superstitions. But all at once her eyes got bright and a sort of glow of inward satisfaction pervaded her, and she said to herself—but not aloud, for the whole thing was inward and inexplicable—"Bertie is near me, or else he is thinking of me as I am of him;" and this communion of sympathy seemed to destroy the feeling of loneliness and

steep her in sudden happiness. When Mrs. Pratt came in an hour later she found her sitting looking into the fire as placidly and contentedly as a child. She was even surprised to find how late it was, and took her candlestick with a half-laughing apology.

But the next morning, as Lettice and she were crossing the hard crisp snow in the wintry sunshine, on their way to the peacocks' promenade, Pratt met them and pointed out to Mary the clear unmistakable marks of countless footsteps right round the house.

"The gardener and me have been tracing them ever so far," he said solemnly, pointing to the mysterious footprints. "They are right across the park as far as the lodge gates, and not a creature has been up to the house since last afternoon! Some of them followed the carriage tracks, and they are right round the house. Should I speak to the police? I could easily take one of the horses and ride over to Canterton; it is not many miles, and the horses are roughed."

"Look here! Aunt Mary," interposed Lettice eagerly; "what a lot of footmarks in one

corner!" and Mary followed her. The window belonged to the morning-room, where they had sat last night; and the track of footsteps had turned and doubled and retraced themselves. Pratt shook his head and pondered heavily.

"I am thinking it looks suspicious, ma'am, and I had better be riding over to Canterton; that is what Adkinson and Mrs. Pratt and me think."

"Oh no, Pratt, thank you, leave it alone; it was only some poor wanderer; I am not at all afraid," returned his mistress decidedly; and she took Lettice's hand and went off to the peacocks' promenade, leaving Pratt still shaking his head very dubiously.

"Are you quite sure it is all right?" asked Lettice rather doubtfully.

"Yes, dear, quite sure!" returned Mary; and her step was firm, and there was a glow on her cheek as she answered. Later on she left Lettice feeding the tame pheasants, and came back alone and stood by the morning-room window, looking long at the footprints.

"I knew it!" she murmured to herself;

"somehow I felt it. Oh, Bertie! it is so like you!" And from that moment she believed with a faith that needed no convincing that her lover had actually kept watch and ward like a faithful sentinel outside the walls of Crome that night.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ALL-SORTS SHOP AT BROTHERTON.

If Mary had been like other girls she would certainly have commenced her new life with vague expectations that would have been doomed to disappointment. A presentiment that something out of the common must happen each day would have kept her restless, turned sweetness to acerbity, and moved her to brief passing moods of discontent. But Mary was wiser in her generation. Her first evening in her new home had been blessed indeed; but she was reasonable, and knew such comforts must be rare. Human nature cannot go now as heretofore among the tents and fill their own little measures with such heaven-sent manna; such consolations are sparsely scattered through a lifetime; even if it be given to us to entertain angels unawares,

we are not conscious of our visitants until they have left.

So she neither expected nor questioned, but simply rested in the possession of her sweet secret, not breaking the sacred seal of silence, but folding up her treasure, and laying it apart in her heart, as careful and thrifty souls fold up some precious fabric too good for daily use.

She had so much to do too, those first few days; she had to gather up the reins of office, and literally, as well as metaphorically, to set her house in order.

So while Lettice, for the first time in her life, enjoyed the sweets of liberty and wandered at her will about the place, feeding and coaxing the live pets, from the peacocks and tame pheasants down to the horses, and the old black cat and kittens that lived in the stable loft, Mary looked over her hoards of plate and linen, altered rooms, readjusted furniture, brought curious old things to light, and inspected and hired servants to complete her modest establishment.

Mary had determined from the first that

there should be no extravagance or useless show; the house should be properly kept, and with a due regard to hospitality; Pratt should have a boy under him, and there must be a good kitchen-maid to assist his wife; two housemaids would keep the place in good order, and Rhoda should be reserved for Janet and the children. Bee would require constant supervision, and there would be ample scope for needlework; but she laughingly declined Mrs. Pratt's suggestion that Rhoda should be considered as her own maid.

"My good soul," she said in an amused voice, "you do not know me, or you would not propose such a thing. I am a most independent person, and not at all a fine lady. What should I do with a maid? I think, with the gardeners and coachman and odd man, as you call him, we shall muster a very respectable household for a single woman with no encumbrances. I do not want to work any of you too hard, but at the same time I do not wish to burden myself with a number of useless dependants."

"Our young lady has a head on her

shoulders!" was Mrs. Pratt's verdict as she went downstairs after this consultation. "For all her softness and mild speaking and her pleasant way of smiling at one, she is as firm as firm can be. It is my opinion, Pratt, that if she had once made up her mind about a thing, nothing would move her."

"What's the odds as long as she keeps things straight and comfortable?" returned Pratt, who had already conceived a great respect and liking for his young mistress. "Ah! the old missis knew what she was about. It wasn't likely she would take such a powerful fancy to a high-flying, touch-me-not sort of person as Mrs. St. John!" for Janet was no favourite in the servants' hall at Crome.

"I am not denying you're right, Pratt," replied his wife, "but I am thinking she is a bit soberer and more staid than her age warrants. What is the use of your putting all that polish on that plate? I'll be bound there is not a dance or a dinner-party to be given either this or that side of Christmas. She is all for good works, and feeding the poor, and such like things."

"And what's the odds?" observed Pratt again, "I hope I know my duty and can live up to it, if I don't wait at another dinner party as long as I am here," and his leather worked still more vigorously at the silver branches of the great èpergne. "If good work is her hobby, I suppose we must put up with the faults of our betters. Some folks of her age—for she is only a slip of a girl, after all—might have turned the old place out of doors, and made us that miserable we should be fit to hang ourselves. Supposing it had been Mr. Walter, now,"—and as Mrs. Pratt put her handkerchief to her eyes and said, "And right you are, Pratt," the brief argument ceased.

Mary's first occupation was to alter her own room, and the changes she introduced were so judicious that even that critical personage Janet pronounced it a model of comfort.

The huge canopied bedstead had been removed, and a small brass one of old and very exquisite workmanship had been transferred from one of the other rooms. The vast

empty space was partially occupied by a round table, an old-fashioned lounge, and some cosy-looking easy-chairs. A carved cabinet to match the wardrobe had been filled with Mary's favourite books, and a fine old print of the San Sisto Madonna hung over the mantelpiece. In one corner there was a hanging cupboard of china, which gave a pleasing tone of colour to the room. The anteroom was at present fitted up for Lettice's use; but Mary eventually intended to turn it into a sort of nondescript workroom, where she and the children might busy themselves on wet days.

But her greatest pleasure was in fitting up and arranging the rooms that were to be allotted to Janet and her children during the months that the Rectory would be uninhabitable. A suite of pleasant rooms, some of them opening into each other, was being already prepared for them.

The disused billiard-room would make an excellent playroom or schoolroom for the little girls, while the room adjoining, which was already fitted up as a study or library,

should be set apart for Maurice's use. Janet could occupy the morning-room, and Mary planned how she would surprise her, by choosing a more tasteful cretonne.

"Poor Janet!" she said to herself, "I do believe that ugly or ill-chosen colours make her positively uncomfortable. Those sprawling green leaves and carnations, which are so quaint and old-fashioned to me, would make her eyes ache with a sense of glare and incongruity. She shall not know the room when she comes; it shall be the perfection of a country morning-room;" and though Mary loved that room best in the house, because of those remembered footprints underneath the windows, she heroically resolved that Janet should call it hers during her stay, and that she would pitch her tent elsewhere—a piece of self-sacrifice that Janet nipped in the bud by vowing that it was Mary's room, and that she meant to sit principally in Maurice's study, where she could superintend the children's lessons and be at hand if he wanted her.

All these plans for her sister's comfort kept Mary busy and her heart warm. The

mornings used to fly, while she and Rhoda worked first in one room and then in another. It was often a surprise when the gong sounded, and Lettice came running up three steps at a time with Boy behind her, to tell her luncheon was ready.

The afternoons were devoted to long rambles. The snow had soon melted, and as neither Lettice nor her aunt minded wet boots or miry lanes, they and Boy had soon made acquaintance with the surrounding country, often losing themselves and coming home tired and famished to the high tea, that for Lettice's sake had taken the place of the more formal dinner. In the evenings they read aloud and worked; and when her little companion went to bed, Mary wrote long letters to Janet and Dollie.

Sometimes, but not often, they would drive. Randall the coachman was compelled to exercise his horses by himself; Mary found these drives so tedious, but for Lettice's sake she would sacrifice herself sometimes. Once they had a delightful day: they drove into Canterton and had dinner at the quaint old inn,

and then wandered about the town and attended service in the cathedral.

To Mary this was such a treat that she promised herself to repeat it with Maurice and Janet. How Maurice would enjoy it, she thought. To her the stupendous cathedral was a perfect vision of beauty and rest, and the sweetly-intoned service seemed to lull her into unutterable repose.

Another day Randall drove them to Featherston. That was a marvellous day to Lettice. That grey wintry afternoon was set apart as a sort of epoch in her life, when she and Mary crossed the little high windy churchyard, and below them lay the sea, and the slow, booming rush of the waves breaking on the shore. This was Lettice's first view of the sea.

Lettice would have stayed for hours, but Mary felt a sort of oppression, looking over the long grey waste of waters and listening to the dismal wash of the waves; a heavy grey sky brooded over them, a mingled sense of monotony and restlessness seemed to invest her outward and inward world. It was a

relief when Randall turned his horses' heads homeward, and they went back through the long dark roads among the glimmering hedgerows. Lettice nestled up to her aunt cosily in the darkness. Mary felt warm childish hands stealing to her neck.

"Oh, dear Aunt Mary, what a lovely afternoon! and oh, I am so tired and happy!" And this was what Lettice said nearly every day; she was always "so tired and so happy;" and the pale thin cheeks were filling out and rounding into oval curves, and the blue eyes seemed to get colour and light. "Janet would hardly know her child," she wrote. She was almost sorry that she made this remark, innocent as it was; it drew forth such a response from Janet.

"Can you wonder at it?" replied the anxious mother. "Lettice looks well because she is breathing sweet country air; for the first time she is leading a child's natural life. Before this she was merely pining through a sort of sickly existence.

"With all your love for Lettice, you hardly know her as well as I do [a private query from Mary at this point]. She is so terribly sensitive. I believe she takes after me in that; and all these wretched sights

and sounds by which we are surrounded, these rags and tatters that you and Maurice find so alluring, oppress and weigh on her spirits. Why are there so many unhappy people in the world? that is what she is always asking; and even the sufferings of the dumb creatures, the over-driven cattle and jaded horses, seem to fret her tender spirit.

"But all my darlings will owe their deliverance to Aunt Mary's brave act of self-sacrifice. "Oh, Mary, Mary! what do we not owe to you, my dear?"

Mary put down the letter with a rising flush and sigh.

"Poor Janet! If it be a sacrifice, why will you keep piling up the faggots in this manner?" she thought in her vexation, and then was angry with herself for her irritability; but she said as little as possible of Lettice in her next letter. Somehow she found Janet's gratitude very hard to bear sometimes. But one thing rejoiced her; she found a grand opening for work for Maurice and herself, and on the afternoon she discovered that, a dull weight seemed lifted off her, and she felt as though she could breathe more freely.

For a painful conviction had been stealing over her that Maurice's energies would rust in

this small out-of-the-way parish. The village was straggling, and, with the exception of a few cottages dropped down near the church, the inhabitants were fairly well-to-do. Some of the parishioners were wealthy people, and lived in the great houses enclosed in grounds, towards which the young mistress of Crome cast looks of disfavour, for she would willingly have eschewed her richer neighbours and confined herself to intercourse with her poorer ones. As for taking her place in the county, as Janet wished, Mary registered a "never" in her downright fashion.

There were schools, and they were tolerably well attended, but the mistress was a flighty-looking inefficient sort of person. Mary thought the children looked dull and listless, staring at strangers in stupid rustic fashion, and evidently somewhat in awe of their teacher.

"I think Miss Leigh singularly ill adapted for her post," wrote Mary. "If I am not mistaken, the children suffer under a system of petty tyranny, and yet there seems no method, and hardly a form of discipline. The school needs reorganising, and I shall be greatly surprised if you do not replace your teacher within the next six months."

Mary with her young companion roamed up and down the village, paying visits here and there, and every day she grew more puzzled and discouraged. For what would Maurice find to do?

All the people went to church, and nodded and napped through the sermon. The women carried their prayer-books wrapped up in blue spotted handkerchiefs, and often had a nosegay beside; there were one or two picturesque smock frocks, and one old woman in a scarlet cloak and drawn black bonnet that was the very picture of a country dame. Mary found she was stone deaf, and could not read. Yet there she was always in her place, with her great book in its blue wrapper, dropping her old-fashioned curtseys in the churchyard when any of the gentry passed. It was all very rural and quaint, and the peaceful atmosphere was not without its charms. But how could Maurice's vast energies concentrate themselves on this group of gaping rustics and those pews full of feathers and finery where the so-called county people worshipped after their own fashion? Mary's knowledge of her brother's

character was almost unerring, and she was not a little troubled in her mind. But one afternoon Lettice and she had discovered about a mile and a half from Crome a little village called Brotherton.

It was one of those out-of-the-way places that seem to have dropped down accidentally, and without any special purpose. The whole village consisted of a winding street, to which a miry lane gave egress, with a dismal winter setting of ploughed fields and bare hedge-rows.

The lane was unpromising—a mere succession of ruts filled up with black oozing mud; so Mary left Lettice sitting on a fallen log, with Boy to guard her, and continued her researches alone.

She was glad afterwards that she had not suffered the child to accompany her. The cottages at first sight looked comfortable and picturesque; they had thatched roofs, and small enclosures for gardens and piggeries, but a nearer inspection was less favourable.

Some of the windows were broken, and the damp was exuding from the walls; palings

were broken down; the gardens were mere rubbish heaps; untidy-looking women and ragged children came to the doors as Mary passed. There was no church, for Brotherton was an offshoot of Crome parish; but neither was there a mission-room—not even a cottage service. The only attempt at saving the Brotherton souls was made in the small Dissenting chapel, where sundry itinerant preachers were wont to dispense doctrine hot and strong, and with a pungent odour of brimstone and fire to such as would listen to them, thereby insuring nightmares to the many and conviction to the few. But even the hireling Josiah Culpepper was more faithful to his self-imposed trust than Mr. Champneys—writing gentlemanly sermons in his study and preaching them to his slumberous congregation—wholly forgetting "those few sheep in the wilderness" at Brotherton. Mary gave a shake of her head at the Dissenting chapel, and another at the small beer shop adjoining; and then she went into an all-sorts shop, where cheese and tallow candles and marbles and string and such like small gear were dispensed by a little old

woman in horn spectacles and a funny cap. Mary bought some seedy-looking biscuits for Boy, not without a doubt of their wholesomeness, for they were so aged and soft of their kind; and she asked Mrs. Weevil a few questions—Anne Weevil being the name put over the door.

"And you have no school for the children? I suppose some of them come over to Crome?"

"Ay, a few; not above two or three. The little 'uns fright the birds, and the big 'uns work with their fathers and mothers in the field. It is a longish bit to Crome"—Croome, as she pronounced it.

"And you have no cottage service? no clergyman comes near to visit you?"

"Deed, that we have," returned Mrs. Weevil indignantly. "Haven't we got Josiah Culpepper, who comes and preaches in the chapel yonder most Sunday evenings? Eh, he is a rare one is Josiah; he is such a powerful screamer that he makes folks jump off their seats with the starts he gives them. There's Sally Mokes at the ale-house—she nearly went into a fit with his pointing at her, and his saying such horful

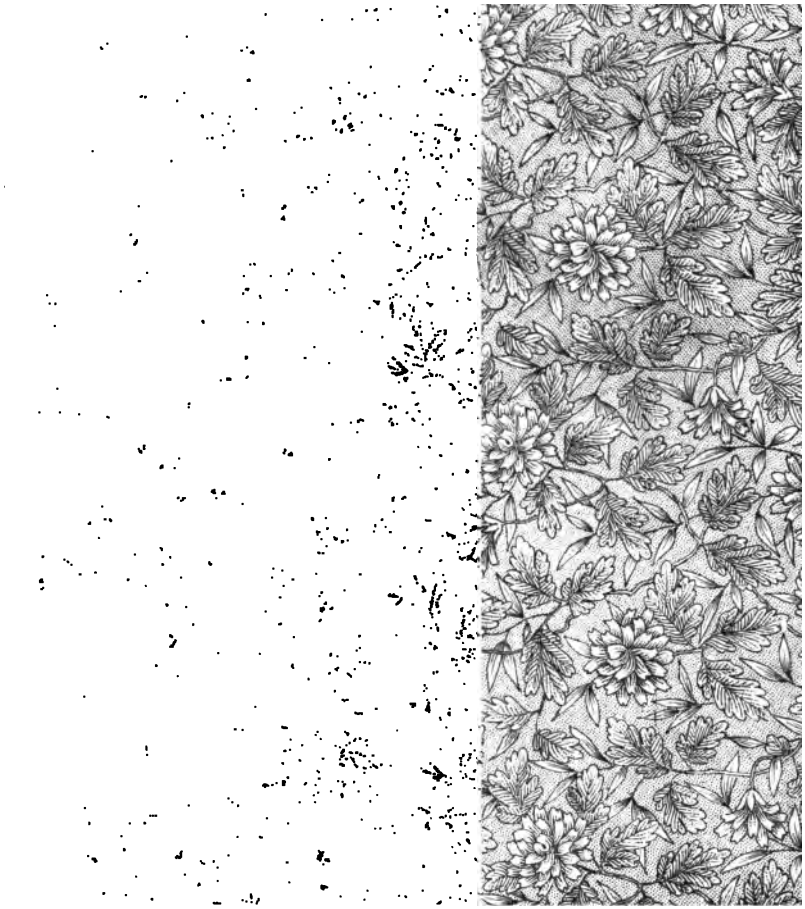
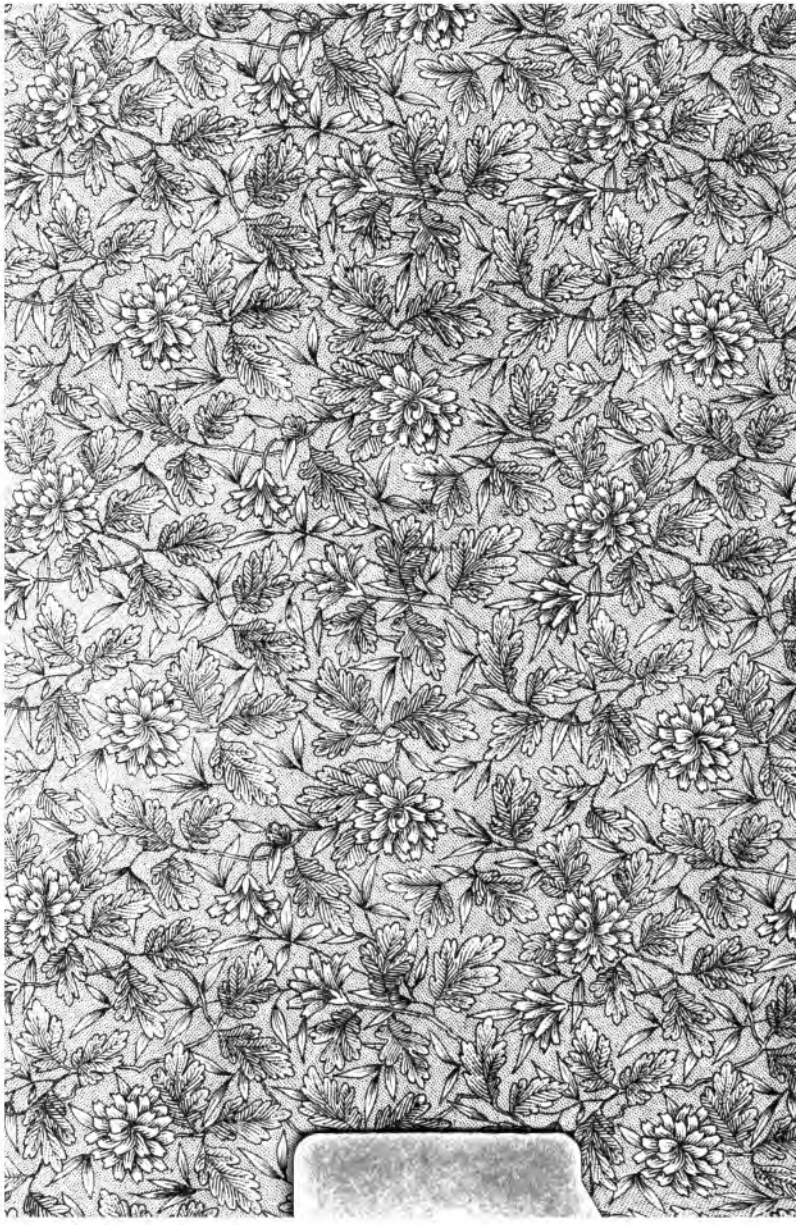
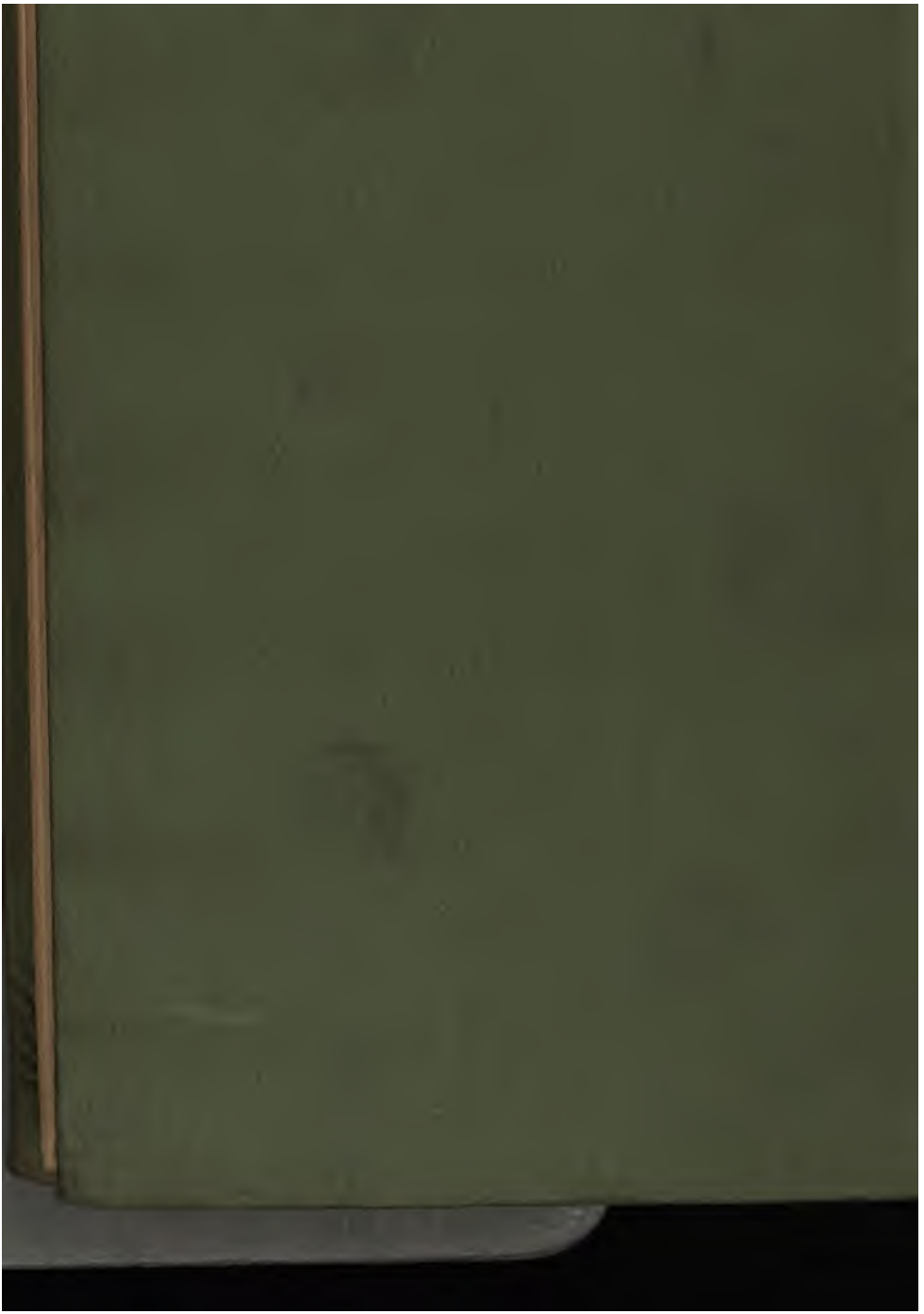
things; not but what Sal takes her drop too freely like the rest of them!"

"And does Mr. Culpepper never tell the people about heaven?" questioned Mary, horrified at this account of Mr. Culpepper's eloquence.

"I don't mind—maybe—I do not remember," returned Anne Weevil, weighing the biscuits and wrapping them in the corner of a newspaper. Boy merely snuffed at the biscuits disdainfully when they were presented to him afterwards, the tallowy flavour not recommending itself to his olfactory nerves. "But I think he is fondest of talking about the other place; he has a powerful sort of mind that deals most freely in the 'orribles. But you see, ma'am," and here Anne leaned her skinny arms on the counter, and looked at Mary severely through her spectacles, "you gentle-folks are all for Canaan, and milk and honey, and we poor critters don't have much of that sort of thing to bless ourselves with. There's Josiah now—he is only a tailor, but his wife took and drank herself to death, and his eldest girl has gone to the bad; and they say his boy is the

idlest, most aggravatin' young varmint that ever was, and always being taken up for poaching; and so Josiah takes a sort of delight of painting things up black. Why, take it all in all, he is the dismallest preacher I have ever heard since I came to live at Brotherton, five-and-twenty years ago. Shall I be putting you up some sweets along with the biscuits?" but this Mary declined; and as one or two slipshod women were now approaching the door, she hastily broke off her discourse; and with another long look at the place, she picked her way along the miry lane, and rejoined Lettice and her four-footed companion.

END OF VOL. II.

S. & H.

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